

# interzone

JULY 1999

Number 145

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## 'Galactic North'

Alastair Reynolds

plus stories by

Francis Amery

Dominic Green

Mary Soon Lee

Keith Brooke & Eric Brown



Winner – British SF Association Special Award 1999



EDITED BY ROBERT SILVERBERG

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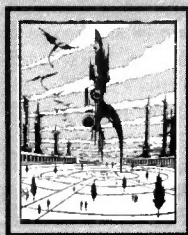
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# interzone

science fiction & fantasy

**JULY 1999**

**Number 145**

## CONTENTS

### Fiction

#### **GALACTIC NORTH**

*Alastair Reynolds*

Illustrations by Dominic Harman

**6**

#### **THE FLIGHT OF THE OH CAROLLIAN**

*Keith Brooke & Eric Brown*

**28**

#### **MOLLY AND THE ANGEL**

*Francis Amery*

**34**

#### **TRANQUILLITY**

*Mary Soon Lee*

**40**

#### **DREAM BLUE MURDER**

*Dominic Green*

**45**

### Features

#### **INTERFACE AND INTERACTION**

*Editorial and Readers' Letters*

**4**

#### **ANSIBLE LINK**

*David Langford*

**22**

#### **PARALLAX VIEW**

*Eric Brown and Keith Brooke in discussion*

**23**

#### **MUTANT POPCORN**

*Nick Lowe*

**43**

#### **BOOK REVIEWS**

*Chris Gilmore, David Mathew,*

*Paul Beardsley and Andy Robertson*

**57**

#### **Cover by Roy Virgo**

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# INTERFACE



In the March 1999 *Interzone* we asked readers to vote on their favourite (and least favourite) stories published in the magazine during 1998 – issues 127 to 138 inclusive. Fifty-two ballots were received by the 30th April deadline, a sufficient number to give a valid result: 38 were from male readers, and 14 from female readers. Our thanks to everyone who participated.

As usual, we subtracted all negative votes from positive ones to arrive at the following scores. The total number of stories published last year was 72 (up considerably from 1997, when we published rather more long pieces and fewer stories in total). To save space, and to avoid embarrassment for those who came towards the bottom of the pile, we list here only the top 44 out of the 72 stories.

## Story Poll Results 1998

1)	Jean-Claude Dunyach:	
	<i>Unravelling the Thread</i>	22
2)	Tony Ballantyne: <i>The Sixth VNM</i>	20
3)	Tanith Lee: <i>Jedella Ghost</i>	17
4=)	Dominic Green:	
	<i>That Thing Over There</i>	16
4=)	Nicholas Waller: <i>The Travel Agent</i>	16
6=)	Eric Brown: <i>Vulpheous</i>	15
7=)	Tanith Lee: <i>Yellow and Red</i>	14
7=)	Paul J. McAuley:	
	<i>The Secret of My Success</i>	14
7=)	Alastair Reynolds:	
	<i>On the Oodnadatta</i>	14
10)	Eric Brown: <i>Onward Station</i>	13
11=)	Storm Constantine & Eloise	
	<i>Coquio: Night's Damsel</i>	12
11=)	Mary Soon Lee:	
	<i>Cause and Consequence</i>	12
11=)	Alastair Reynolds: <i>Stroboscopic</i>	12
14)	Maya Kaathryn Bohnhoff:	
	<i>Who Have No Eyes</i>	11
15)	Gwyneth Jones:	
	<i>Grazing the Long Acre</i>	10
16=)	Stephen Baxter: <i>The Barrier</i>	9
16=)	Timons Esaias: <i>Shift Change</i>	9
16=)	Paul J. McAuley:	
	<i>The Gardens of Saturn</i>	9
16=)	Judi Moore: <i>Thumbs</i>	9
20=)	Timons Esaias:	
	<i>The Mars Convention</i>	8
20=)	Geoff Ryman: <i>Family</i>	8
20=)	John Whitbourn: <i>In the Name of Allah, the Omnipotent?</i>	8
23=)	Stephen Baxter:	
	<i>The Twelfth Album</i>	7
23=)	Alexander Glass: <i>Carla's Eye</i>	7
23=)	Robert Reed: <i>The New System</i>	7
26=)	Frank Cottrell Boyce: <i>The Ahhhhh</i>	6
26=)	Gary Couzens: <i>Rachael</i>	6
26=)	Gwyneth Jones: <i>La Cenerentola</i>	6
26=)	Sylvia M. Siddall: <i>Dryads</i>	6
26=)	Sarah Singleton: <i>Cassilago's Wife</i>	6
26=)	Cherry Wilder: <i>The Bernstein Room</i>	6
32=)	Maya Kaathryn Bohnhoff:	
	<i>Beggars Might Ride</i>	5

32=)	Ramsey Campbell:	
	<i>The Other Names</i>	5
32=)	Lawrence Dyer: <i>Colonies</i>	5
32=)	Alexander Glass: <i>Storage</i>	5
32=)	Mary Soon Lee:	
	<i>The Day Before They Came</i>	5
32=)	Darrell Schweitzer:	
	<i>A Servant of Satan</i>	5
32=)	Ian Watson: <i>What Actually Happened in Docklands</i>	5
39=)	Sarah Ash: <i>Merveille</i>	4
39=)	Maya Kaathryn Bohnhoff:	
	<i>Silver Lining</i>	4
39=)	Stephen Dedman: <i>A Single Shadow</i>	4
39=)	Paul Di Filippo:	
	<i>Never Let Them See You Nova</i>	4
39=)	Brian Stableford: <i>The Piebald Plumber of Haemlin</i>	4
39=)	Dave Stone: <i>Little Killers</i>	4

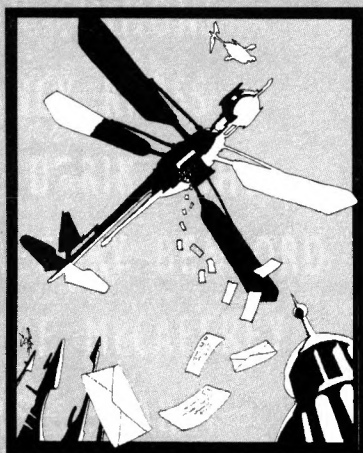
We are sorry to say that the remaining 28 stories all scored fewer than four points – after subtracting negative votes from positive. Please bear in mind that some stories gained considerably more than four votes, but near-equal negative votes dragged them down. Not all our readers have the same tastes.

Our heartiest congratulations to Jean-Claude Dunyach, a French author whom we had never published before, on becoming this year's clear winner. In strong second place was another writer new to us, Tony Ballantyne, who clearly is shaping up to be a popular name. Tanith Lee, Dominic Green, Eric Brown, Paul J. McAuley, Alastair Reynolds and especially Nicholas Waller (another new writer, with his first published story!), all did well to come in the top ten – and Tanith and Eric were there with two stories apiece.

Congratulations to these authors, and indeed to all the others who reached the top 44.

David Pringle

## INTERACTION



## Westfahl on Fantasy

Dear Editors:

I was fascinated to read Gary Westfahl's article on *The Encyclopedia of Fantasy* since I had bought the *EoF* on the same day as that issue of *Interzone* ("The Nine Billion Names of Fantasy," *IZ* 142). I was struck by how well his article followed his proposed model of Fantasy. There is WRONGNESS; Mr Westfahl's efforts are ignored or dismissed. This leads to THINNING; parts are missing from the model as propounded in the *EoF* and the entry on Fantasy is disturbingly short. This results in the CONTEST (>AGON) in which the heroic Westfahl contends with the source of the Wrongness which is John Clute and his misguided new terminology, while relying on ancient and obscure terms of his

own, such as "AGON." Finally there is HEALING. It doesn't matter that the model is wrong because it has been misapplied anyway and the new coinages just discriminate between what the editors like and dislike. The Contest thus boils down to agreeing that "perfunctory, mindless" writing is bad and "creative, reflective" writing is good and we're all on the same side. Unfortunately since that conclusion is not new, nothing has been changed in the world of fantasy criticism by Westfahl's tilting at straw men and the article is an example of the TEMPLATE subset of GENRE FANTASY (q.v.). We can confidently expect another article, much the same, next month.

I'm not completely convinced by some of the new terms myself but I don't believe Westfahl's assertion that English is so conservative. Ambrose Bierce's *Devil's Dictionary* says, "Dic-



tionary, n. A malevolent literary device for cramping the growth of a language and making it hard and inelastic." Terms gain currency by use and writers can add meaning to them as they like and change their meaning likewise (>SANSKRIT which is a fixed language and can only be embellished by stylistic tweaks). If a new term is useful it will be noticed and enshrined by the grammarians soon enough. I note that in John Clute's book reviews in issue 142 he is happily using some of his new words, e.g. GODGAME. It is no bad thing to have a lot of different labels for the same concept so that subtleties of meaning can be added to them; for example the difference between a LAND and a FANTASYLAND seems to be that while both refer to the setting of the story, the former is less cliched than the latter. In fact since Diana Wynne Jones's marvelous book, *The Tough Guide to Fantasyland*, the F-word has become quite derogatory.

For the most part, though, I am impressed by the *EoF* and the concept labels are clear. The difference between a DIRTY DOZEN and a MAGNIFICENT SEVEN is clear to me, and posterity which does not have the benefit of having seen both films can look up the definitions.

P.S. re. Nicholas Waller's letter in the same issue: it took 600 million years for us to evolve from single-celled ooze. If lethal gamma-ray bursts occur as frequently as every few million years we should not be here. I think it more likely, given the length of time it took us to evolve, the observed lifespan of civilizations, the length of time it takes to go from star to star and the number there are to visit in just this galaxy, that the odds of anyone happening by in Gary Westfahl's lifetime are negligible.

P.P.S. re. another of Mr Westfahl's articles: I also think it is egocentric to claim that since that event has not happened, sf based on human travel between the stars is fallacious and that since the US Agenda SF is thus also a fallacy, sf is dead. It seems strange for an sf critic to miss the point of setting stories on other planets.

**Mike Gallagher**

*m.gallagher@dundee.ac.uk*

## Artist's Success

Dear Editors:

I'm honoured and pleased to announce two events concerning my last cover for you (*Interzone* #128, February 1998). Both have occurred in the USA.

First event: My last *IZ* cover has just won the First Annual *Tangent Online* Favourite Magazine Cover

Poll for 1999! You can check results and announcement at: <http://www.sfsite.com/tangent/others/dave07.htm>

Second event: The same cover has been selected by the blue-ribbon jury of *Spectrum* (Underwood Books) for inclusion in *Spectrum VI*, the 1999 edition of the Best in Contemporary Fantastic Art. In the credits section I've indicated *Interzone* as client. The inclusion was confirmed to me directly by Arnie Fenner, curator of *Spectrum*, by e-mail.

In addition, I'm an Italia Award Finalist as Best Pro Artist and Artist Guest of Honour at the upcoming National Convention, FANTASIA 1999/ ITALCON 25, with a solo science-fiction exhibit.

**Maurizio Manzieri**

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**Editor:** Congratulations, Maurizio!

Dear Editors:

"[Doctor Who] companions who indulge in sex are punished with disease..." (Interaction, *IZ* 141).

Though it's not mentioned by name, I imagine David Forbes is referring to my spinoff novel *The Man in the Velvet Mask*. I hope he'll read it sometime and realize the pitfalls of repeating fan gossip as fact. For the record, the companion character – Dodo – has sex during the course of the story and incidentally undergoes an ambiguous but physically harmless biological transformation. She doesn't catch a disease. No one gets punished.

I can't think of any other Doctor Who novel that remotely resembles

Mr Forbes's peculiar fantasy. So, regardless of what I may or may not have written, it's a bit rich for him to imply that sexual disease is a recurring theme in a great many other books by a great many other authors.

**Daniel O'Mahony**

*Fordingbridge, Hants.*

Dear Editors:

I co-edit the World Fantasy Award-winning anthology series *The Year's Best Fantasy and Horror* (St Martin's Press) with Terri Windling. The 12th annual collection will be out in July 1999. We are now reading for the 13th. This will include all material published in the year 1999.

I am looking for stories from all branches of horror: from the traditional-supernatural to the borderline, including high-tech science-fiction horror, psychological horror or anything else that might qualify. If in doubt, send it. This is a reprint anthology so I am only reading material published in or about to be published during the year 1999. The submission deadline for stories is December 15th 1999. Anything sent after this deadline will reach me too late to be considered for 1999. If a magazine you edit will be coming out by December 31st 1999 you can send me galleys or mss so that I can judge the stories in time. The sooner I get the material the better.

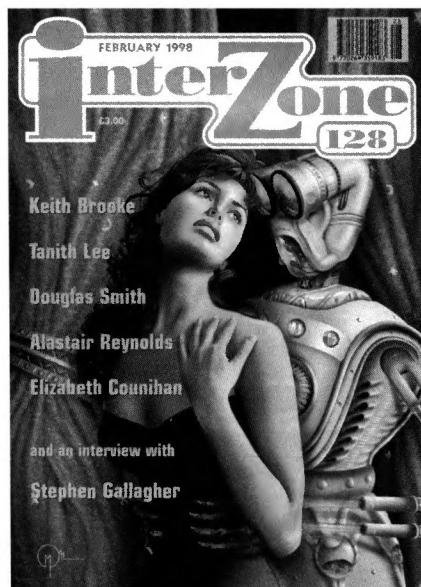
I do not want to receive manuscripts from authors of stories from venues that it's likely I already receive regularly (like *Interzone*, *The Third Alternative*, *Peeping Tom*, etc) or from anthologies, unless I don't have that anthology.

There is a section in front of the book that covers "the year in horror," and "the year in fantasy." These include mention of magazines and publishing news concerning the horror and fantasy fields, novels we've read and liked, and in my section, "odds and ends" — material that doesn't fit anywhere else but that I feel might interest the horror reader (like trading cards, strange non-fiction titles, art books, etc). But I have to be aware of this material in order to mention it. The deadline for this section is January 30th, 2000. When sending me material please put YEAR'S BEST HORROR on the envelope.

Terri Windling's submissions should be sent to: The Year's Best Fantasy, c/o Richard and Mardelle Kunz, 2509 N. Campbell #402, Tucson, AZ 85719-3304, USA. She covers fantasy and I cover horror. If you consider something both, send to each of us. We do not confer on our choices.

**Ellen Datlow**

*48 Eighth Avenue, suite 405  
New York, NY 10014, USA*



# Galactic North

## Alastair Reynolds

Luyten 726-8  
cometary halo – AD 2303

The two of them crouched in a tunnel of filthy ice, bulky in spacesuits. Fifty metres down the tunnel the servitor straddled the bore on skeletal legs, transmitting a thermal image onto their visors. Irravel jumped whenever the noise shifted into something human, cradling her gun nervously. “Damn this thing,” she said. “Hardly get my finger round the trigger.”

“It can’t read your blood, Captain.” Markarian, next to her, managed not to sound as if he was stating the obvious. “You have to set the override to female.”

Of course. Belatedly, remembering the training session on Fand where they’d been shown how to use the weapons – months of subjective time ago; years of worldtime – Irravel told the gun to reshape itself. The memory-plastic casing squirmed in her gloves to something more manageable. It still felt wrong.

“How are we doing?”

“Last teams in position. That’s all the tunnels covered. They’ll have to fight their way in.”

“I think that might well be on the agenda.”

“Maybe so.” Markarian sighted along his weapon like a sniper. “But they’ll get a surprise when they reach the cargo.”

True: the ship had sealed the sleeper chambers the instant the pirates had arrived near the comet. Counter-intrusion weaponry would seriously inconvenience anyone trying to break in, unless they had the right authorization. And there, Irravel knew, was the problem; the thing she would rather not have had to deal with.

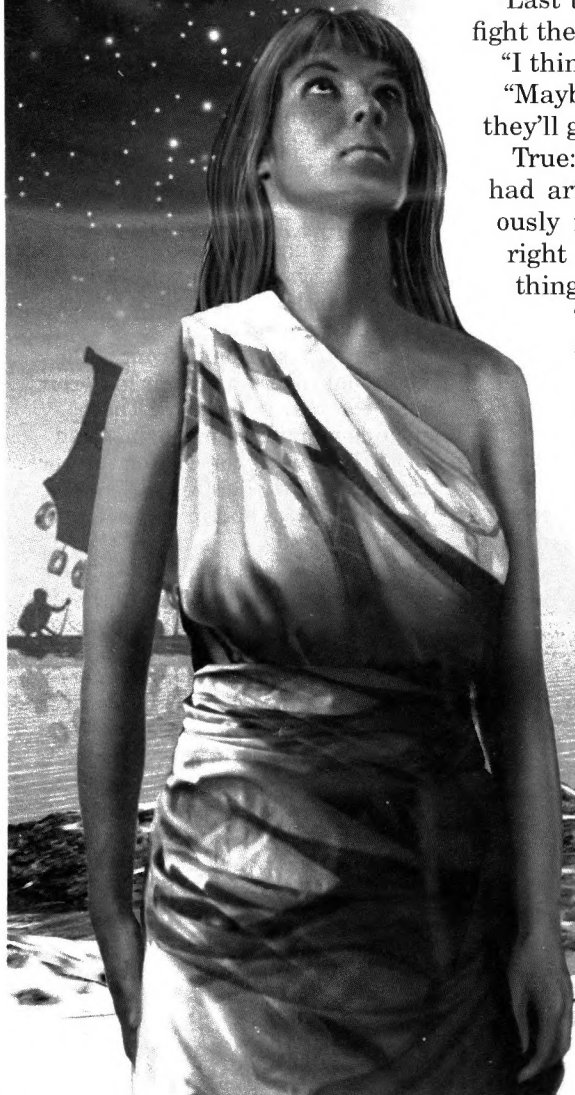
“Markarian,” Irravel said. “If we’re taken prisoner, there’s a chance they’ll try and make us give up the codes.”

“Don’t think that hasn’t crossed my mind already.” Markarian rechecked some aspect of his gun. “I won’t let you down, Irravel.”

“It’s not a question of letting me down,” she said, carefully.

“It’s whether or not we betray the cargo.”

“I know.” For a moment they studied each other’s faces through their visors, acknowledging what had once been more than professional friendship; the shared knowledge that they would kill each other rather than place the





cargo in harm's way.

Their ship was the ramliner *Hirondelle*. She was damaged; lashed to the comet for repair. Improbably sleek for a creature of vacuum, her four kilometre-long conic hull tapered to a needle-sharp prow and sprouted trumpet-shaped engines from two swept-back spars at the rear. It had been Irravel's first captaincy: a routine 17-year hop from Fand, in the Lacaille 9352 system, to Yellowstone, around Epsilon Eridani – with 20,000 reefersleep colonists. What had gone wrong should only have happened once in a thousand trips: a speck of interstellar dust had slipped through the ship's screen of anti-collision lasers and punched a cavernous hole in the ablative ice-shield, vaporizing a quarter of its mass. With a massively reduced likelihood of surviving another collision, the ship had automatically steered toward the nearest system capable of supplying repair materials.

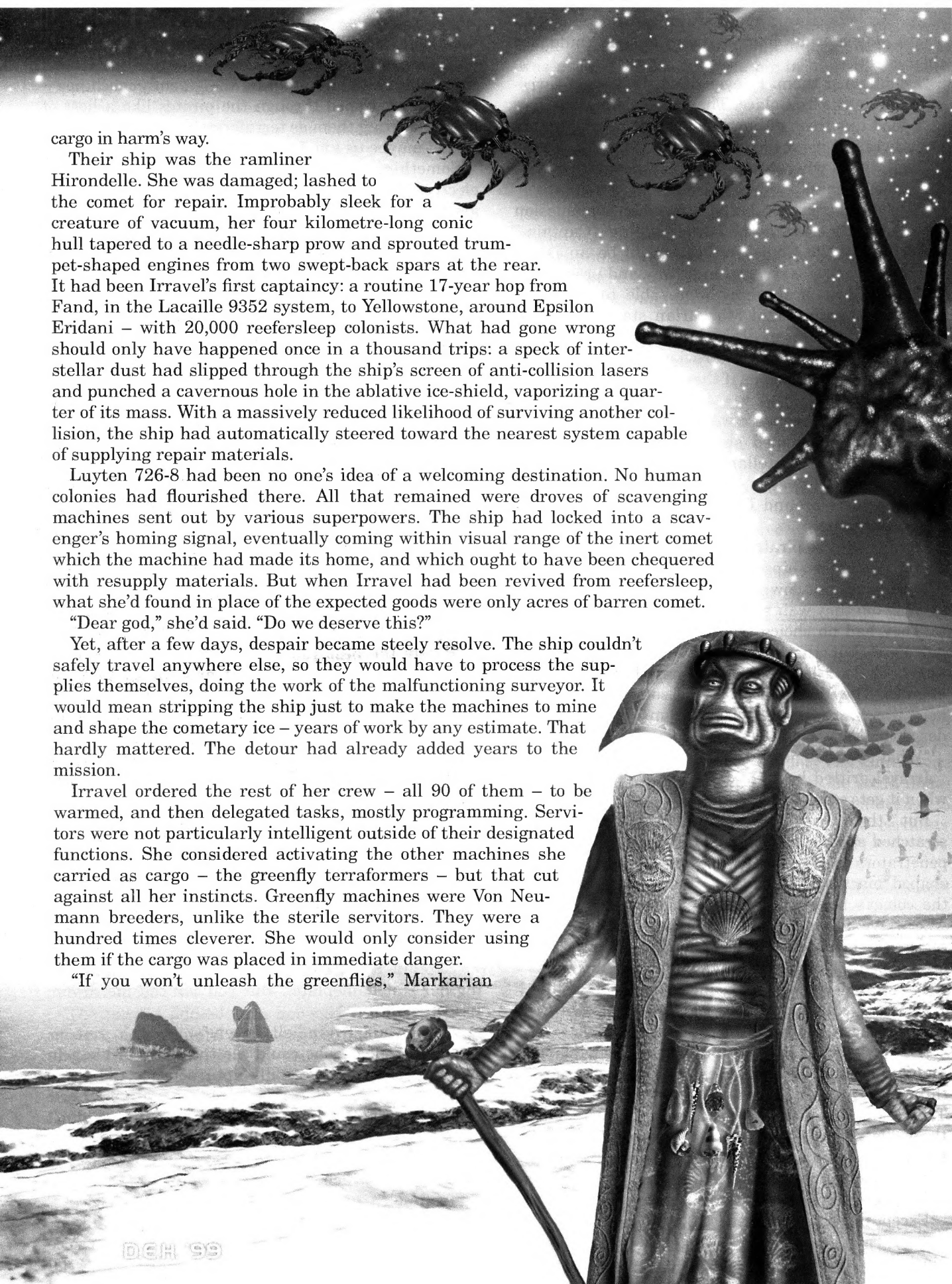
Luyten 726-8 had been no one's idea of a welcoming destination. No human colonies had flourished there. All that remained were droves of scavenging machines sent out by various superpowers. The ship had locked into a scavenger's homing signal, eventually coming within visual range of the inert comet which the machine had made its home, and which ought to have been chequered with resupply materials. But when Irravel had been revived from reefersleep, what she'd found in place of the expected goods were only acres of barren comet.

"Dear god," she'd said. "Do we deserve this?"

Yet, after a few days, despair became steely resolve. The ship couldn't safely travel anywhere else, so they would have to process the supplies themselves, doing the work of the malfunctioning surveyor. It would mean stripping the ship just to make the machines to mine and shape the cometary ice – years of work by any estimate. That hardly mattered. The detour had already added years to the mission.

Irravel ordered the rest of her crew – all 90 of them – to be warmed, and then delegated tasks, mostly programming. Servitors were not particularly intelligent outside of their designated functions. She considered activating the other machines she carried as cargo – the greenfly terraformers – but that cut against all her instincts. Greenfly machines were Von Neumann breeders, unlike the sterile servitors. They were a hundred times cleverer. She would only consider using them if the cargo was placed in immediate danger.

"If you won't unleash the greenflies," Markarian



DGH 93

said. "At least think about waking the Conjoiners. There may only be four of them, but we could use their expertise."

"I don't trust them. I never liked the idea of carrying them in the first place. They unsettle me."

"I don't like them either, but I'm willing to bury my prejudices if it means fixing the ship faster."

"Well, that's where we differ. I'm not, so don't raise the subject again."

"Yes," Markarian said, and only when its omission was insolently clear did he bother adding: "Captain."

Eventually the Conjoiners ceased to be an issue, when the work was clearly underway and proceeding normally. Most of the crew were able to return to reefersleep. Irravel and Markarian stayed awake a little longer, and even after they'd gone under, they woke every seven months to review the status of the works. It began to look as if they would succeed without assistance.

Until the day they were woken out of schedule, and a dark, grapple-shaped ship was almost upon the comet. Not an interstellar ship, it must have come from somewhere nearby – probably within the same halo of comets around Luyten 726-8. It silence was not encouraging.

"I think they're pirates," Irravel said. "I've heard of one or two other ships going missing near here, and it was always put down to accident."

"Why did they wait so long?"

"They had no choice. There are billions of comets out here, but they're never less than light-hours apart. That's a long way if you only have in-system engines. They must have a base somewhere else to keep watch, maybe light-weeks from here, like a spider with a very wide web."

"What do we do now?"

Irravel gritted her teeth. "Do what anything does when it gets stuck in the middle of a web. Fight back."

But the Hironnelle's minimal defences only scratched against the enemy ship. Oblivious, it fired penetrators and winched closer. Dozens of crab-shaped machines swarmed out and dropped below the comet's horizon, impacting with seismic thuds. After a few minutes, sensors in the furthest tunnels registered intruders. Only a handful of crew had been woken. They broke guns out of the armoury – small arms designed for pacification in the unlikely event of a shipboard riot – and then established defensive positions in all the cometary tunnels.

Nervously now, Irravel and Markarian advanced round the tunnel's bend, cleated shoes whispering through ice barely more substantial than smoke. They had to keep their suit exhausts from touching the walls if they didn't want to get blown back by superheated steam. Irravel jumped again at the pattern of photons on her visor and then forced calm, telling herself it was another mirage.

Except this time it stayed.

Markarian opened fire, squeezing rounds past the servitor. It lurched aside, a gaping hole in its carapace.

Black crabs came round the bend, encrusted with sensors and guns. The first reached the ruined servitor and dismembered it with ease. If only there'd been time to activate and program the greenfly machines – they'd have ripped through the pirates like a host of furies, treating them as terraformable matter.

And maybe us too, Irravel thought.

Something flashed through the clouds of steam; an electromagnetic pulse that turned Irravel's suit sluggish, as if every joint had corroded. The whine of the circulator died to silence, leaving only her frenzied breathing. Something pressed against her backpack. She turned slowly around, wary of falling against the walls. There were crabs everywhere. The chamber in which they'd been cornered was littered with the bodies of the other crew members; pink trails of blood on ice reaching from other tunnels. They'd been killed and dragged here.

Two words jumped to mind: kill yourself. But first she had to kill Markarian, in case he lacked the nerve himself. She couldn't see his face through his visor. That was good. Painfully, she pointed the gun toward him and squeezed the trigger. But instead of firing, the gun shivered in her hands, stowing itself into a quarter of its operational volume. "Thank you for using this weapon system," it said cheerfully.

Irravel let it drift to the ground.

A new voice rasped in her helmet. "If you're thinking of surrendering, now might not be a bad time."

"Bastard," Irravel said, softly.

"Really the best you can manage?" The language was Canasian – what Irravel and Markarian had spoken on Fand – but heavily accented, as if the native tongue was Norte or Russish, or spoken with an impediment. "Bastard's quite a compliment compared to some of things my clients come up with."

"Give me time; I'll work on it."

"Positive attitude – that's good." The lid of a crab hinged up, revealing the prone form of a man in a mesh of motion-sensors. He crawled from the mesh and stepped onto the ice, wearing a spacesuit formed from segmented metal plates. Totems had been welded to the armour, around holographic starscapes infested with serpentine monsters and scantily-clad maidens.

"Who are you?"

"Captain Run Seven." He stepped closer, examining her suit nameplate. "But you can call me Seven, Irravel Veda."

"I hope you burn in hell, Seven."

Seven smiled – she could see the curve of his grin through his visor; the oddly upturned nostrils of his nose above it. "I'm sensing some negativity here, Irravel. I think we need to put that behind us, don't you?"

Irravel looked at her murdered adjutants. "Maybe if you tell me which one was the traitor."

"Traitor?"

"You seemed to have no difficulty finding us."

"Actually, you found us." It was a woman's voice this time. "We use lures – tampering with commercial beacons, like the scavenger's." She emerged from one



of the other attack machines, wearing a suit similar to Seven's, except that it displayed the testosterone-saturated male analogues of his space-maidens; all rippling torsos and chromed cod-pieces.

"Wreckers," Irravel breathed.

"Yeah. Ships home in on the beacons, then find they ain't going anywhere in a hurry. We move in from the halo."

"Disclose all our confidential practices while you're at it, Mirsky," Seven said.

She glared at him through her visor. "Veda would have figured it out."

"We'll never know now, will we?"

"What does it matter?" she said. "Gonna kill them anyway, aren't you?"

Seven flashed an arc of teeth filed to points and waved a hand toward the female pirate. "Allow me to introduce Mirsky, our loose-tongued but efficient information retrieval specialist. She's going to take you on a little trip down memory lane; see if we can't remember those access codes."

"What codes?"

"It'll come back to you," Seven said.

They were taken through the tunnels, past half-assembled mining machines, onto the surface and then into the pirate ship. The ship was huge: most of it living space. Cramped corridors snaked through hydroponics galleries of spring wheat and dwarf papaya, strung with xenon lights. The ship hummed constantly with carbon dioxide scrubbers, the fetid air making Irravel sneeze. There were children everywhere, frowning at the captives. The pirates obviously had no reefersleep technology: they stayed warm the whole time, and some of the children Irravel saw had probably been born after the *Hirondelle* had arrived here.

They arrived at a pair of interrogation rooms where they were separated. Irravel's room held a couch converted from an old command seat, still carrying warning decals. A console stood in one corner. Painted torture scenes fought for wallspace with racks of surgical equipment; drills, blades and ratcheted contraptions speckled with rust.

Irravel breathed deeply. Hyperventilation could have an anaesthetic effect. Her conditioning would in any case create a state of detachment: the pain would be no less intense, but she would feel it at one remove.

She hoped.

The pirates fiddled with her suit, confused by the modern design, until they stripped her down to her shipboard uniform. Mirsky leant over her. She was small-boned and dark skinned, dirty hair rising in a topknot, eyes mismatched shades of azure. Something clung to the side of her head above the left ear; a silver box with winking status lights. She fixed a crown to Irravel's head then made adjustments on the console.

"Decided yet?" Captain Run Seven said, sauntering into the room. He was unlatching his helmet.

"What?"

"Which of our portfolio of interrogation packages you're going to opt for."

She was looking at his face now. It wasn't really human. Seven had a man's bulk and shape, but there was at least as much of the pig in his face. His nose was a snout, his ears two tapered flaps framing a hairless pink skull. Pale eyes evinced animal cunning.

"What the hell are you?"

"Excellent question," Seven said, clicking a finger in her direction. His bare hand was dark skinned and feminine. "To be honest, I don't really know. A genetics experiment, perhaps? Was I the seventh failure, or the first success?"

"Are you sure you want an honest answer on that?"

He ignored her. "All I know is that I've been here – in the halo around Luyten 726-8 – for as long as I can remember."

"Someone sent you here?"

"In a tiny automated spacecraft; perhaps an old lifepod. The ship's governing personality raised me as well as it could; attempted to make of me a well-rounded individual." Seven trailed off momentarily. "Eventually I was found by a passing ship. I staged what might be termed a hostile takeover bid. From then on I've had an organization largely recruited from my client base."

"You're insane. It might have worked once, but it won't work with us."

"Why should you be any different?"

"Neural conditioning. I treat the cargo as my offspring – all 20,000 of them. I can't betray them in any way."

Seven smiled his piggy smile. "Funny; the last client thought that too."

Sometime later Irravel woke alone in a reefersleep casket. She remembered only dislocated episodes of interrogation. There was the memory of a kind of sacrifice, and, later, of the worst terror she could imagine – so intense that she could not bring its cause to mind. Underpinning everything was the certainty that she had not given up the codes.

So why was she still alive?

Everything was quiet and cold. Once she was able to move, she found a suit and wandered the *Hirondelle* until she reached a porthole. They were still lashed to the comet. The other craft was gone; presumably en route back to the base in the halo where the pirates must have had a larger ship.

She looked for Markarian, but there was no sign of him.

Then she checked the 20-sleeper chambers; the thousand-berth dormitories. The chamber doors were all open. Most of the sleepers were still there. They'd been butchered, carved open for implants, minds pulped by destructive memory-trawling devices. The horror was too great for any recognizable emotional response. The conditioning made each death feel like a stolen part of her.

Yet something kept her on the edge of sanity: the discovery that 200 sleepers were missing. There was no sign that they'd been butchered like the others, which left the possibility that they'd been abducted

by the pig. It was madness; it would not begin to compensate for the loss of the others – but her psychology allowed no other line of thought.

She could find them again.

Her plan was disarmingly simple. It crystallized in her mind with the clarity of a divine vision. It would be done.

She would repair the ship. She would hunt down Seven. She would recover the sleepers from him. And enact whatever retribution she deemed fit.

She found the chamber where the four Conjoiners had slept, well away from the main dormitories, in part of the ship where the pirates were not likely to have wandered. She was hoping she could revive them and seek their assistance. There seemed no way they could make things worse for her. But her hopes faded when she saw the scorch marks of weapon blasts around the bulkhead; the door forced.

She stepped inside anyway.

They'd been a sect on Mars, originally; a clique of cyberneticists with a particular fondness for self-experimentation. In 2190 their final experiment had involved distributed processing – allowing their enhanced minds to merge into one massively-parallel neural net. The resultant event – a permanent, irrevocable escalation to a new mode of consciousness – was known as the Transenlightenment.

There'd been a war, of course.

Demarchists had long seen both sides. They used neural augmentation themselves, policed so that they never approached the Conjoiner threshold. They'd brokered the peace, defusing the suspicion around the Conjoiners. Conjoiners had fuelled Demarchist expansion from Europa with their technologies, fused in the white-heat of Transenlightenment. Four of them were along as observers because the Hironnelle used their ramscoop drives.

Irravel still didn't trust them.

And maybe it didn't matter. The reefersleep units – fluted caskets like streamlined coffins – were riddled with blast holes. Grimacing against the smell, Irravel examined the remains inside. They'd been cut open, but the pirates seemed to have abandoned the job half way through, not finding the kinds of implants they were expecting. And maybe not even recognizing that they were dealing with anything other than normal humans, Irravel thought – especially if the pirates who'd done this hadn't been among Seven's more experienced crewmembers; just trigger-happy thugs.

She examined the final casket; the one furthest from the door. It was damaged, but not so badly as the others. The display cartouches were still alive, a patina of frost still adhering to the casket's lid. The Conjoiner inside looked intact: the pirates had never reached him. She read his nameplate: Remontoire.

"Yeah, he's a live one," said a voice behind Irravel. "Now back off real slow."

Heart racing, Irravel did as she was told. Slowly, she turned around, facing the woman whose voice

she recognized.

"Mirsky?" she said.

"Yeah, it's your lucky day." Mirsky was wearing her suit, but without the helmet, making her head seem shrunken in the moat of her neck-ring. She had a gun on Irravel, but the way she pointed it was half-hearted, as if this was a stage in their relationship she wanted to get over as quickly as possible.

"What the hell are you doing here?"

"Same as you, Veda. Trying to figure out how much shit we're in; how hard it'll be to get this ship moving again. Guess we had the same idea about the Conjoiners. Seven went berserk when he heard they'd been killed, but I figured it was worth checking how thorough the job had been."

"Stop; slow down. Start at the beginning. Why aren't you with Seven?"

Mirsky pushed past her and consulted the reefersleep indicators. "Seven and me had a falling out. Fill in the rest yourself." With quick jabs of her free hand she called up different display modes, frowning at each. "Shit, this ain't gonna be easy. If we wake the guy without his three friends, he's gonna be psychotic; no use to us at all."

"What kind of falling out?"

"Seven reckoned I was holding back too much in the interrogation; not putting you through enough hell." She scratched at the silver box on the side of her head. "Maybe we can wake him, then fake the cybernetic presence of his friends – what do you think?"

"Why am I still alive, if Seven broke into the sleeper chambers? Why are you still alive?"

"Seven's a sadist. Abandonment's more his style than a quick and clean execution. As for you, the pig cut a deal with your second-in-command."

The implication of that sunk in. "Markarian gave him the codes?"

"It wasn't you, Veda."

Strange relief flooded Irravel. She could never be absolved of the crime of losing the cargo, but at least her degree of complicity had lessened.

"But that was only half the deal," Mirsky continued. "The rest was Seven promising not to kill you if Markarian agreed to join the Hideyoshi; our main ship." She told Irravel that there'd been a transmitter rigged to her reefersleep unit, so that Markarian would know she was still alive.

"Seven must have known he was taking a risk leaving both of us alive."

"A pretty small one. The ship's in pieces and Seven will assume neither of us has the brains to patch it back together." Mirsky slipped the gun into a holster. "But Seven assumed the Conjoiners were dead. Big mistake. Once we figure a way to wake Remontoire safely, he can help us fix the ship; make it faster too."

"You've got this all worked out, haven't you?"

"More or less. Something tells me you aren't absolutely ready to start trusting me, though."

"Sorry, Mirsky, but you don't make the world's most convincing turncoat."



She reached up with her free hand, gripping the box on the side of her head. "Know what this is? A loyalty-shunt. Makes simian stem cells; pumps them into the internal carotid artery, just above the cavernous sinus. They jump the blood-brain barrier and build a whole bunch of transient structures tied to primate dominance hierarchies; alpha-male shit. That's how Seven had us under his command – he was King Monkey. But I've turned it off now."

"That's supposed to reassure me?"

"No, but maybe this will."

Mirsky tugged at the box, ripping it away from the side of her head in curds of blood.

### **Luyten 726-8 cometary halo – AD 2309**

Irravel felt the Hiron-delle turn like a compass needle. The ramscoops gasped at interstellar gas, sucking lone atoms of cosmic hydrogen from cubic metres of vacuum. The engines spat twin beams of thrust, pressing Irravel into her seat with two gees of acceleration. Hardly moving now, still in the local frame of the cometary halo, but in only six months she would be nudging lightspeed.

Her seat floated on a boom in the middle of the dodecahedral bridge. "Map," Irravel said, and was suddenly drowning in stars; an immense 30-light-year-wide projection of human settled space, centred on the First System.

"There's the bastard," Mirsky said, pointing from her own hovering seat, her voice only slightly strained under the gee-load. "Map; give us projection of the Hideyoshi's vector, and plot our intercept."

The pirate ship's icon was still very close to Luyten 726-8; less than a tenth of a light-year out. They had not seen Seven until now. The thrust from his ship was so tightly focused that it had taken until now for the widening beams of the exhaust to sweep over Hiron-delle's sensors. But now they knew where he was headed. A dashed line indicated the likely

course, arrowing right through the map's heart and out toward the system Lalande 21185. Now came the intercept vector, a near-tangent which sliced Seven's course beyond Sol.

"When does it happen?" Irravel said.

"Depends on how much attention Seven's paying to what's coming up behind him, for a start, and what kind of evasive stunts he can pull."

"Most of my simulations predict an intercept between 2325 and 2330,"

Remontoire said.

Irravel savoured the dates. Even for someone trained to fly a starship between systems, they sounded uncomfortably like the future.

"Are you sure it's him – not just some other ship that happened to be waiting in the halo?"

"Trust me," Mirsky said. "I can smell the swine from here."

"She's right," Remontoire said. "The destination makes perfect sense. Seven was prohibited from staying here much longer, once the number of missing ships became too large to be explained away as accidents. Now he must seek a well-settled system to profit from what he has stolen."

The Conjoiner looked completely normal at first glance – a bald man wearing a ship's uniform, his expression placid – but then one noticed the unnatural bulge of his skull, covered only in a fuzz of baby hair. Most of his glial cells had been supplanted by machines which served the same structural functions but which also performed specialized cybernetic duties, like interfacing with other commune partners or external machinery. Even the organic neurones in his brain were now webbed together by artificial connections which allowed transmission speeds of kilometres per second; factors of ten faster than in normal brains. Only the problem of dispersing waste heat denied the Conjoiners even faster modes of thought.

It was seven years since they'd woken him. Remon-



toire had not dealt well with the murder of his three compatriots, but Irravel and Mirsky had managed to keep him sane by feeding input into the glial machines, crudely simulating rapport with other commune members. "It provides the kind of comfort to me that a ghost limb offers an amputee," Remontoire had said. "An illusion of wholeness – but no substitute for the real thing."

"What more can we do?" Irravel said.

"Return me to another commune with all speed."

Irravel had agreed, provided Remontoire helped with the ship.

He hadn't let her down. Under his supervision, half the ship's mass had been sacrificed, permitting twice the acceleration. They had dug a vault in the comet, lined it with support systems, and entombed what remained of the cargo. The sleepers were nominally dead – there was no real expectation of reviving them again, even if medicine improved in the future – but Irravel had nonetheless set servitors to tend the dead for however long it took, and programmed the beacon to lure another ship, this time to pick up the dead. All that had taken years, of course – but it had also taken Seven as much time to cross the halo to his base; time again to show himself.

"Be so much easier if you didn't want the others back," Mirsky said. "Then we could just slam past the pig at relativistic speed and hit him with seven kinds of shit." She was very proud of the weapons she'd built into the ship, copied from pirate designs with Remontoire's help.

"I want the sleepers back," Irravel said.

"And Markarian?"

"He's mine," she said, after due consideration. "You get the pig."

### **Near Lalande 21185 – AD 2328**

Relativity squeezed stars until they bled colour. Half a kilometre ahead, the side of Seven's ship raced toward Irravel like a tsunami.

The Hideyoshi was the same shape as the Hiron-delle; honed less by human whim than the edicts of physics. But the Hideyoshi was heavier, with a wider cross-section, incapable of matching the Hiron-delle's acceleration or of pushing so close to C. It had taken years, but they'd caught up with Seven, and now the attack was in progress.

Irravel, Mirsky and Remontoire wore thruster-pack equipped suits, of the type used for inspections outside the ship, with added armour and weapons. Painted for effect, they looked like mechanized Samurai. Another 47 suits were slaved to theirs, acting as decoys. They'd crossed 50,000 kilometres of space between the ships.

"You're sure Seven doesn't have any defences?" Irravel had asked, not long after waking from reefer-sleep.

"Only the in-system ship had any firepower," Mirsky said. She looked older now; new lines engraved under her eyes. "That's because no one's ever been insane enough to contemplate storming

another ship in interstellar space."

"Until now."

But it wasn't so stupid, and Mirsky knew it. Matching velocities with another ship was only a question of being faster; squeezing fractionally closer to lightspeed. It might take time, but sooner or later the distance would be closed. And it had taken time, none of which Mirsky had spent in reefer-sleep. Partly it was because she lacked the right implants – ripped out in infancy when she was captured by Seven. Partly it was a distaste for the very idea of being frozen, instilled by years of pirate upbringing. But also because she wanted time to refine her weapons. They had fired a salvo against the enemy before crossing space in the suits, softening up any weapons buried in his ice and opening holes into the Hideyoshi's interior.

Now Irravel's vision blurred, her suit slowing itself before slamming into the ice.

Whiteness swallowed her.

For a moment she couldn't remember what she was doing here. Then awareness came and she slithered back up the tunnel excavated on her fall, until she reached the surface of the Hideyoshi's ice-shield.

"Veda – you intact?"

Her armour's shoulder-mounted comm laser found a line-of-sight to Mirsky. Mirsky was 20 or 30 metres away, around the ship's lazy circumference, balancing on a ledge of ice. Walls of it stretched above and below like a rockface, lit by the glare from the engines. Decoys were arriving by the second.

"I'm alive," Irravel said. "Where's the entry point?"

"Couple of hundred metres upship."

"Damn. I wanted to come in closer. Remontoire's out of line-of-sight. How much fuel do you have left?"

"Scarcely enough to take the chill off a penguin's dick."

Mirsky raised her arms above her head and fired lines into the ice, rocketing out from her sleeves. Belly sliding against the shield, she retracted the lines and hauled herself upship.

Irravel followed. They'd burned all their fuel crossing between the two ships, but that was part of the plan. If they didn't have a chance to raid Seven's reserves, they'd just kick themselves into space and let the Hiron-delle home in on them.

"You think Seven saw us cross over?"

"Definitely. And you can bet he's doing something about it, too."

"Don't do anything that might endanger the cargo, Mirsky – no matter how tempting Seven makes it."

"Would you sacrifice half the sleepers to get the other half back?"

"That's not remotely an option."

Above their heads crevasses opened like eyes. Pirate crabs erupted out, black as night against the ice. Irravel opened fire on the machines. This time, with better weapons and real armour, she began to inflict damage. Behind the crabs, pirates emerged, bulbous in customized armour. Lasers scuffed the ice; bright through gouts of steam. Irravel saw Remontoire now: he was unharmed, and doing his best to



shoot the pirates into space.

Above, one of Irravel's shots dislodged a pirate.

The Hideyoshi's acceleration dropped him toward her. When the impact came she hardly felt it, her suit's guylines staying firm. The pirate folded around her like a broken toy then bounced back against the ship, pinned there by her suit. He was too close to shoot unless Irravel wanted to blow herself into space. Distorted behind glass, his face shaped a word. She got in closer until their visors were touching. Through the glass she saw the asymmetric bulge of a loyalty-shunt.

The face was Markarian's. At first it seemed like absurd coincidence. Then it occurred to her that Seven might have sent his newest recruit out to show his mettle. Maybe Seven wouldn't be far behind. Confronting adversaries was part of the alpha-male inheritance.

"Irravel," Markarian said, voice laced with static. "I'm glad you're alive."

"Don't flatter yourself you're the reason I'm here, Markarian. I came for the cargo. You're just next on the list."

"What are you going to do – kill me?"

"Do you think you deserve any better than that?" Irravel adjusted her position. "Or are you going to try and justify betraying the cargo?"

He pulled his aged features into a smile. "We made a deal, Irravel; the same way you made a deal about greenfly. But you don't remember that, do you?"

"Maybe I sold the greenfly machines to the pig," she said. "If I did that, it was a calculated move to buy the safety of the cargo. You, on the other hand, cut a deal with Seven to save your neck."

The other pirates were holding fire, nervously marking them. "I did it to save yours, actually. Does that make any sense?" There was wonder in his eyes now. "Did you ever see Mirsky's hand? That was never her own. The pirates swap limbs as badges of rank. They're very good at connective surgery."

"You're not making much sense, Markarian."

Dislodged ice rained on them. Irravel looked around in time to see another pirate emerging from a crevasse. She recognized the suit artwork: it was Seven. He wore things, strung around his utility belt in transparent bags like obscene fruit. She stared at them for a few seconds before their nature clicked into horrific focus: frozen human heads.

Irravel stifled a reaction to vomit.

"Yes," Run Seven said. "Ten of your compatriots, recently unburdened of their bodies. But don't worry – they're not harmed in any fundamental sense. Their brains are intact – provided you don't warm them with an ill-aimed shot."

"I've got a clear line of fire," Mirsky said. "Just say the word and the bastard's an instant anatomy lesson."

"Wait," Irravel said. "Don't shoot."

"Sound business sense, Captain Veda. I see you appreciate the value of these heads."

"What's he talking about?" Mirsky said.

"Their neural patterns can be retrieved." It was

Remontoire speaking now. "We Conjoiners have had the ability to copy minds onto machine substrates for some time now, though we haven't advertised it. But that doesn't matter – there have been experiments on Yellowstone which approach our early successes. And these heads aren't even thinking: only topologies need to be mapped, not electrochemical processes."

The pig took one of the heads from his belt and held it to eye-level, for inspection. "The Conjoiner's right. They're not really dead. And they can be yours if you wish to do business."

"What do you want for them?"

"Markarian, for a start. All that Demarchy expertise makes for a very efficient second-in-command."

Irravel glanced down at her prisoner. "You can't buy loyalty with a box and a few neural connections."

"No? In what way do our loyalty shunts differ from the psychosurgery which your world inflicted on you, Irravel, yoking your motherhood instinct to 20,000 sleepers you don't even know by name?"

"We have a deal or not?"

"Only if you throw in the Conjoiner as well."

Irravel looked at Remontoire; some snake part of her mind weighing options with reptilian detachment.

"No!" he said. "You promised!"

"Shut up," Seven said. "Or when you do get to rejoin your friends, it'll be in instalments."

"I'm sorry," Irravel said. "I can't lose even ten of the cargo."

Seven tossed the first head down to her. "Now let Markarian go and we'll see about the rest."

Irravel looked down at him. "It's not over between you and me."

Then she released him, and he scrambled back up the ice toward Seven.

"Excellent. Here's another head. Now the Conjoiner."

Irravel issued a subvocal command; watched Remontoire stiffen. "His suit's paralysed. Take him."

Two pirates worked down to him, checked him over and nodded toward Seven. Between them they hauled him back up the ice, vanishing into a crevasse and back into the *Hideyoshi*.

"The other eight heads," Irravel said.

"I'm going to throw them away from the ship. You'll be able to locate them easily enough. While I'm doing that, I'm going to retreat, and you're going to leave."

"We could end this now," Mirsky said.

"I need those heads."

"They really fucked with your psychology big-time, didn't they?" She raised her weapon and began shooting Seven and the other pirates. Irravel watched her carve up the remaining heads; splintering frozen bone into the vacuum.

"No!"

"Sorry," Mirsky said. "Had to do it, Veda."

Seven clutched at his chest, fingers mashing the pulp of the heads, still tethered to his belt. She'd punctured his suit. As he tried to stem the damburst, his face was carved with the intolerable knowledge that his reign had just ended.

But something had hit Irravel too.

## Sylveste Institute, Yellowstone orbit, Epsilon Eridani – AD 2415

"Where am I?" Irravel asked. "How am I thinking this?"

The woman's voice was the colour of mahogany. "Somewhere safe. You died on the ice, but we got you back in time."

"For what?"

Mirsky sighed, as though this was something she would rather not have had to explain this soon.

"To scan you, just like we did with the frozen heads. Copy you into the ship."

Maybe she should have felt horror, or indignation, or even relief that some part of her had been spared.

Instead, she just felt impatience.

"What now?"

"We're working on it," Mirsky said.

## Trans-Aldebaran Space – AD 2673

"We saved her body after she died," Mirsky said, wheezing slightly. She found it hard to move around under what to Irravel was the ship's normal two and a half gees of thrust. "After the battle we brought her back onboard."

Irravel thought of her mother dying on the other ship, the one they were chasing. For years they had deliberately not narrowed the distance, holding back but not allowing the *Hideyoshi* to slip from view.

Until now, it hadn't even occurred to Irravel to ask why.

She looked through the casket's window, trying to match her own features against what she saw in the woman's face, trying to project her own 15 years into Mother Irravel's adulthood.

"Why did you keep her so cold?"

"We had to extract what we could from her brain," Mirsky said. "Memories and neural patterns. We trawled them and stored them in the ship."

"What good was that?"

"We knew they'd come in useful again."

She'd been cloned from Mother Irravel. They were not identical – no Mixmaster expertise could duplicate the precise biochemical environment of Mother Irravel's womb, or the shaping experiences of early infancy, and their personalities had been sculpted centuries apart, in totally different worlds. But they were still close copies. They even shared memories: scripted into Irravel's mind by medichines, so that she barely noticed each addition to her own experiences.

"Why did you do this?" she asked.

"Because Irravel began something," Mirsky said. "Something I promised I'd help her finish."

## Stormwatch Station, Aethra, Hyades Trade Envelope – AD 2931

"Why are you interested in our weapons?" The Nestbuilder asked. "We are not aware of any wars within the *chordate phylum* at this epoch."

"It's a personal matter," Irravel said.

The Nestbuilder hovered a metre above the trade floor, suspended in a column of microgravity. They were oxygen-breathing arthropods who'd once ascended to

spacefaring capability. No longer intelligent, yet supported by their self-renewing machinery, they migrated from system to system, constructing elaborate, space-filling structures from solid diamond. Other Nestbuilder swarms would arrive and occasionally occupy the new nests. There seemed no purpose to this activity, but for tens of thousands of years they had been host to a smaller, cleverer species known as the Slugs. Small communities of Slugs – anything up to a dozen – lived in warm, damp niches in a Nestbuilder's intricately folded shell. They had long since learned how to control the host's behaviour and exploit its subservient technology.

Irravel studied a Slug now, crawling out from under a lip of shell material.

The thing was a multicellular invertebrate not much larger than her fist; a bag of soft blue protoplasm, sprouting appendages only when they were needed. A slightly bipolar shadow near one end might have been its central nervous system, but there hardly seemed enough of it to trap sentience. There were no obvious sense or communicational organs, but a pulsing filament of blue slime reached back into the Nestbuilder's fold. When the Slug spoke, it did so through the Nestbuilder; a rattle of chitin from the host's mouthparts which approximated human language. A hovering jewel connected to the station's lexical database did the rest, rendering the voice calmly feminine.

"A personal matter? A vendetta? Then it's true." The mouthparts clicked together in what humans presumed was the symbiotic creature's laughter response. "You *are* who we suspected."

"She did tell you her name was Irravel, guy," Mirsky said, sipping black coffee with delicate movements of the exoskeletal frame she always wore in high gravity.

"Among you *chordates*, the name is not so unusual now," the Slug reminded them. "But you do fit the description, Irravel."

They were near one of the station's vast picture windows, overlooking Aethra's mighty, roiling cloud decks, 50 kilometres below. It was getting dark now and the stormplayers were preparing to start a show. Irravel saw two of their seeders descending into the clouds; robot craft tethered by a nearly invisible filament. The seeders would position the filament so that it bridged cloud layers with different static potentials; they'd then detach and return to Stormwatch, while the filament held itself in position by rippling along its length. For hundreds of kilometres around, other filaments would have been placed in carefully selected positions. They were electrically isolating now, but at the stormplayer's discretion, each filament would flick over into a conductive state: a massive, choreographed lightning flash.

"I never set out to become a legend," Irravel said. "Or a myth, for that matter."

"Yes. There are so many stories about you, Veda, that it might be simpler to assume you never existed."

"What makes you think otherwise?"

"The fact that a *chordate* who could have been Markarian also passed this way, only a year or so ago." The Nestbuilder's shell pigmentation flickered,

briefly revealing a picture of Markarian's ship.

"So you sold weapons to him?"

"That would be telling, wouldn't it?" The mouthparts clattered again. "You would have to answer a question of ours first."

Outside, the opening flashes of the night's performance gilded the horizon; like the first stirrings of a symphony. Aethra's rings echoed the flashes, pale ghosts momentarily cleaving the sky.

"What is it you want to know?"

"We Slugs are among the few intelligent, starfaring cultures in this part of the Galaxy. During the War against Intelligence we avoided the Inhibitors by hiding ourselves among the mindless Nestbuilders."

Irravel nodded. Slugs were one of the few alien species known to humanity who would even acknowledge the existence of the feared Inhibitors. Like humanity, they'd fought and beaten the revenants – at least for now.

"It is the weaponry you seek which enabled us to triumph – but even then only at colossal cost to our phylum. Now we are watchful for new threats."

"I don't see where this is leading."

"We have heard rumours. Since you have come from the direction of those rumours – the local stellar neighbourhood around your phylum's birth star – we imagined you might have information of value."

Irravel exchanged a sideways glance with Mirsky. The old woman's wizened, age-spotted skull looked as fragile as paper, but she remained an unrivalled tactician. They knew each other so well now that Mirsky could impart advice with the subtlest of movements; expression barely troubling the lined mask of her face.

"What kind of information were you seeking?"

"Information about something that frightens us." The Nestbuilder's pigmentation flickered again, forming an image of – something. It was a splinter of grey-brown against speckled blackness – perhaps the Nestbuilder's attempt at visualizing a planetoid. And then something erupted across the surface of the world, racing from end to end like a film of verdigris. Where it had passed, fissures opened up, deepening until they were black fractures, as if the world were a calving iceberg. And then it blew apart, shattering into a thousand green-tinged fragments.

"What was that?" Irravel said.

"We were rather hoping you could tell us." The Nestbuilder's pigmentation refreshed again, and this time what they were seeing was clearly a star, veiled in a toroidal belt of golden dust. "Machines have dismantled every rocky object in the system where these images were captured; Ross 128, which lies within eleven light years of your birth star. They have engendered a swarm of trillions of rocks on independent orbits. Each rock is sheathed in a pressurized bubble membrane, within which an artificial plant-based ecosystem has been created. The same machines have fashioned other sources of raw material into mirrors, larger than worlds themselves, which trap sunlight above and below the ecliptic and focus it onto the swarm."

"And why does this frighten you?"

The Nestbuilder leant closer in its column of micro-gravity. "Because we saw it being resisted. As if these machines had never been intended to wreak such transformations. As if your phylum had created something it could not control."

"And – these attempts at resistance?"

"Failed."

"But if one system was accidentally transformed, it doesn't mean" Irravel trailed off. "You're worried about them crossing interstellar space, to other systems. Even if that happened – couldn't you resist the spread? This can only be human technology – nothing that would pose any threat to yourselves."

"Perhaps it was once human technology, with programmed limitations to prevent it replicating uncontrollably. But those shackles have been broken. Worse, the machines have hybridized, gaining resilience and adaptability with each encounter with something external. First the Melding Plague, infection with which may have been a deliberate ploy to by-pass the replication limits."

Irravel nodded. The Melding Plague had swept human space 400 years earlier, terminating the Demarchist *Belle Epoque*. Like the Black Death of the previous millennium, it evoked terror generations after it had passed.

"Later," the Nestbuilder continued, "it may have encountered and assimilated Inhibitor technology, or worse. Now it will be very hard to stop, even with the weapons at our disposal."

An image of one of the machines flickered onto the Nestbuilder's shell, like a peculiar tattoo. Irravel shivered. The Slug was right: waves of hybridization had transformed the initial architecture into something queasily alien. But enough of the original plan remained for there to be no doubt in her mind. She was looking at an evolved greenfly; one of the self-replicating breeders she had given Captain Run Seven. How it had broken loose was anyone's guess. She speculated that Seven's crew had sold the technology on to a third party, decades or centuries after gaining it from her. Perhaps that third party had reclusively experimented in the Ross 128 system, until the day when greenfly tore out of their control

"I don't know why you think I can help," she said.

"Perhaps we were mistaken, then, to credit a 500-year-old rumour which said that you had been the original source of these machines."

She had insulted it by daring to bluff. The Slugs were easily insulted. They read human beings far better than humans read Slugs.

"Like you say," she answered. "You can't believe everything."

The Slug made the Nestbuilder fold its armoured, spindly limbs across its mouthparts, a gesture of displeased huffiness.

"You *chordates*," it said. "You're all the same."

## Interstellar space – AD 3354

Mirsky was dead. She had died of old age.



Irravel placed her body in an armoured coffin and ejected her into space when the *Hirondelle's* speed was only a hair's breadth under light. "Do it for me, Irravel," Mirsky had told her, toward the end. "Keep my body aboard until we're almost touching light, and then fire me ahead of the ship."

"Is that what you want?"

"It's an old pirate tradition. Burial at C." She forced a smile which must have sapped what little energy she had left. "That's a joke, Irravel, but it only makes sense in a language neither of us have heard for a while."

Irravel pretended that she understood. "Mirsky? There's something I have to tell you. Do you remember the Nestbuilder?"

"That was centuries ago, Veda."

"I know. I just keep worrying that maybe it was right."

"About what?"

"Those machines. About how I started it all. They say it's spread now; to other systems. It doesn't look like anyone knows how to stop it."

"And you think all that was your fault?"

"It's crossed my mind."

Mirsky convulsed, or shrugged – Irravel wasn't sure. "Even if it was your fault, Veda, you did it with the best of intentions. So you fucked up slightly. We all make mistakes."

"Destroying whole solar systems is just a fuck-up?"

"Hey, accidents happen."

"You always did have a sense of humour, Mirsky."

"Yeah; guess I did." She managed a smile. "One of us needed one, Veda."

Thinking of that, Irravel watched the coffin fall ahead, dwindling until it was only a tiny mote of steel-grey, and then nothing.

## Subaru Commonwealth – Pleiades Cluster – AD 4161

The starbridge had long ago attained sentience.

Dense with machinery, it sung an endless hymn to its own immensity, throbbing like the lowest string on a guitar. Vacuum-breathing acolytes had voluntarily rewired their minds to view the bridge as an actual deity, translating the humming into their sensoria and passing decades in contemplative ecstasy.

Clasped in a cushioning field, an elevator ferried Irravel down the bridge from the orbital hub to the surface in a few minutes, accompanied by an entourage of children from the ship, many of whom bore in youth the hurting imprint of Mirsky's genes. The bridge rose like the stem of a goblet from a ground terminal which was itself a scalloped shell of hyperdiamond, filled with tiered perfume gardens and cascading pools, anchored to the largest island in an equatorial archipelago. The senior children walked Irravel down to a beach of silver sand on the terminal's edge, where jewelled crabs moved like toys. She bid the children farewell, then waited, warm breezes fingering the hem of her sari.

Minutes later, the children's elevator flashed heavenward.

Irravel looked out at the ocean, thinking of the Pattern Jugglers. Here, as on dozens of other oceanic worlds, there was a colony of the alien intelligences. Transformed to aquatic bodyplans themselves, the Subaruns had established close rapport with the aliens. In the morning, she would be taken out to meet the Jugglers, drowned, dissolved on the cellular level, every atom in her body swapped for one in the ocean, remade into something not quite human.

She was terrified.

Islanders came toward the shore, skimming water on penanted trimarans, attended by oceanforms, sleek gloss-grey hybrids of porpoise and ray, whistlespeech downshifted into the human spectrum. The Subaruns' epidermal scales shimmered like imbricated armour: biological photocells drinking scorching blue Pleiadean sunlight. Sentient veils hung in the sky, rippling gently like aurorae, shading the archipelago from the fiercest wavelengths. As the actinic eye of Taygeta sank toward the horizon, the veils moved with it like living clouds. Flocks of phantasmagoric birds migrated with the veils.

The purple-skinned elder's scales flashed green and opal as he approached Irravel along the coral jetty, a stick in one webbed hand, supported by two aides, a third shading his aged crown with a delicately water-coloured parasol. The aides were all descended from late-model Conjoiners; they had the translucent cranial crest through which bloodflow had once been channelled to cool their supercharged minds. Seeing them gave Irravel a dual-edged pang of nostalgia and guilt. She had not seen Conjoiners for nearly a thousand years, ever since they had fragmented into a dozen factions and vanished from human affairs. Neither had she entirely forgotten her betrayal of Remontoire.

*But that had been so long ago.*

A Communicant made up the party, gowned in brocade, hazed by a blur of entoptic projections. Communicants were small and elfin, with a phenomenal talent for natural languages, augmented by Juggler transforms. Irravel sensed that this one was old and revered, despite the fact that Communicant genes did not express for great longevity.

The elder halted before her.

The head of his walking stick was a tiny lemur skull inside an egg-sized space helmet. He spoke something clearly ceremonial, but Irravel understood none of the sounds he made. She groped for something to say, recalling the oldest language in her memory, and therefore the one most likely to be recognized in any far-flung human culture.

"Thank you for letting us stop here," she said.

The Communicant hobbled forward, already shaping words experimentally with his wide, protruding lips. For a moment his sounds were like an infant's first attempts at vocalization. But then they resolved into something Irravel understood.

"Am I – um – making the slightest sense to you?"

"Yes," Irravel said. "Yes, thank you."

"Canasian," the Communicant diagnosed. "Twenty-third, twenty-fourth centuries, Lacaille 9352 dialect, Fand subdialect?"

Irravel nodded.

"Your kind are very rare now," he said, studying her as if she was some kind of exotic butterfly. "But not unwelcome." His features cracked into an elfin smile.

"What about Markarian?" Irravel said. "I know his ship passed through this system less than 50 years ago – I still have a fix on it as it moves out of the cluster."

"Other lighthuggers do come, yes. Not many – one or two a century."

"And what happened when the last one came through?"

"The usual tribute was given."

"Tribute?"

"Something ceremonial." The Communicant's smile was wider than ever. "To the glory of Irravel. With many actors, beautiful words, love, death, laughter, tears."

She understood, slowly, dumb-foundedly.

"You're putting on a play?"

The elder must have understood something of that. Nodding proudly, he extended a hand across the darkening bay, oceanforms cutting the water like scythes. A distant raft carried lanterns and the glimmerings of richly painted backdrops. Boats converged from across the bay. A dirigible loomed over the archipelago's edge, pregnant with gondolas.

"We want you to play Irravel," the Communicant said, beckoning her forward. "This is our greatest honour."

When they reached the raft, the Communicant taught Irravel her lines and the actions she would be required to make. It was all simple enough – even the fact that she had to deliver her parts in Subarun. By the end of evening she was fluent in their language. There was nothing she couldn't learn in an instant these days, by sheer force of will. But it was not enough. To catch Markarian, she would have to break out of the narrow labyrinth of human thought entirely. That was why she had come to Jugglers.

That night they performed the play, while boats congregated around them, topheavy with lolling islanders. The sun sank and the sky glared with a thousand blue gems studding blue velvet. Night in the heart of the Pleiades was the most beautiful thing Irravel had dared imagine. But in the direction of Sol, when she amplified her vision, there was a green thumbprint on the sky. Every century, the green wave was larger, as neighbouring solar systems were infected and transformed by the rogue terraforming machines. Given time, it would even reach

the Pleiades.

Irravel got drunk on islander wine and learnt the tributes' history.

The plots varied immensely, but the protagonists always resembled Markarian and Irravel; mythic figures entwined by destiny, remembered across 2,000 years. Sometimes one or the other was the clear villain, but as often as not they were both heroic, misunderstanding each other's motives in true tragic fashion. Sometimes they ended with both parties dying. They rarely ended happily. But

there was always some kind of redemption when the pursuit was done.

In the interlude, she felt she had to tell the Communicant the truth, so that he could tell the elder.

"Listen, there's something you need to know." Irravel didn't wait for his answer. "I'm really her; really the person I'm playing"

For a long time he didn't seem to understand, before shaking his head slowly and sadly.

"No; I thought you'd be different. You seemed different. But many say that."

She shrugged. There seemed little point arguing, and anything she said now could always be ascribed to wine. In the morning, the remark had been quietly forgotten. She was taken out to sea and drowned.

### Galactic North, AD 9730

"Markarian? Answer me."

She watched the *Hideyoshi's* magnified image, looming just out of weapons range. Like the *Hirondelle*, it had changed almost beyond recognition. The hull glistened within a skein of armouring force. The engines, no longer physically coupled to the rest of the ship, flew alongside like dolphins. They were anchored in fields which only became visible when some tiny stress afflicted them.

For centuries of worldtime she had made no attempt to



communicate with him. But now her mind had changed. The green wave had continued for millennia, an iridescent cataract spreading across the eye of the Galaxy. It had assimilated the blue suns of the Subaran Commonwealth in mere centuries – although by then Irravel and Markarian were a thousand light years closer to the core, beginning to turn away from the plane of the Galaxy, and the death screams of those gentle islanders never reached them. Nothing stopped it, and once the green wave had swallowed them, systems fell silent. The Juggler transformation allowed Irravel to grasp the enormity of it; allowed her to stare unflinchingly into the horror of a million poisoned stars and apprehend each individually.

She knew more of what it was, now.

It was impossible for stars to shine green, any more than an ingot of metal could become green-hot if it was raised to a certain temperature. Instead, something was veiling them – staining their light, like coloured glass. Whatever it was stole energy from the stellar spectra at the frequencies of chlorophyll. Stars were shining through curtains of vegetation, like lanterns in a forest. The greenfly machines were turning the Galaxy into a jungle.

It was time to talk. Time – as in the old plays of the dead islanders – to initiate the final act, before the two of them fell into the cold of intergalactic space. She searched her repertoire of communication systems, until she found something which was as ancient as ceremony demanded.

She aimed the message laser at him, cutting through his armour. The beam was too ineffectual to be mistaken as anything other than an attempt to talk. No answer came, so she repeated the message in a variety of formats and languages. Days of ship-time passed – decades of worldtime.

*Talk, you bastard.*

Growing impatient, she examined her weapons options. Armaments from the Nestbuilders were among the most advanced: theoretically they could mole through the loam of spacetime and inflict precise harm anywhere in Markarian's ship. But to use them she had to convince herself that she knew the interior layout of the *Hideyoshi*. Her mass-sensor sweeps were too blurred to be much help. She might as easily harm the sleepers as take out his field nodes. Until now, it was too much risk to contemplate.

But all games needed an end.

Willing her qualms from mind, she enabled the Nestbuilder armaments, feeling them stress spacetime in the *Hirondelle's* belly, ready to short-circuit it entirely. She selected attack loci in Markarian's ship; best guesses that would cripple him rather than blow him out of the sky.

Then something happened.

He replied, modulating his engine thrust in staccato stabs. The frequency was audio. Quickly Irravel translated the modulation.

"I don't understand," Markarian said. "Why you took so long to answer me, and why you ignored me so long when I replied?"

"You never replied until now," she said. "I'd have known if you had."

"Would you?"

There was something in his tone which convinced her that he wasn't lying. Which left only one possibility: that he had tried speaking to her before, and that in some way her own ship had kept this knowledge from her.

"Mirsky must have done it," Irravel said. "She must have installed filters to block any communications from your ship."

"Mirsky?"

"She would have done it as a favour to me; maybe as an order from my former self." She didn't bother elaborating: Markarian was sure to know she had died and then been reborn as a clone of the original Irravel. "My former self had the neural conditioning which kept her on the trail of the sleepers. The clone never had it, which meant that my instinct to pursue the sleepers had to be reinforced."

"By lies?"

"Mirsky would have done it out of friendship," Irravel said. And for a moment she believed herself, while wondering how friendship could seem so like betrayal.

Markarian's image smiled. They faced each other across an absurdly long banquet table, with the Galaxy projected above it, flickering in the light of candelabra.

"Well?" he said, of the green stain spreading across the spiral. "What do you think?"

Irravel had long ago stopped counting time and distance, but she knew it had been at least 15,000 years and that many light years since they had turned from the plane. Part of her knew, of course: although the wave swallowed suns, it had no use for pulsars, and their metronomic ticking and slow decay allowed positional triangulation in space and time with chilling precision. But she elected to bury that knowledge beneath her conscious thought processes: one of the simpler Juggler tricks.

"What do I think? I think it terrifies me."

"Our emotional responses haven't diverged as much as I'd feared."

They didn't have to use language. They could have swapped pure mental concepts between ships: concatenated strings of qualia, some of which could only be grasped in minds rewired by Pattern Jugglers. But Irravel considered it sufficient that they could look each other in the eye without flinching.

The Galaxy falling below had been frozen in time: light waves struggling to overtake Irravel and Markarian. The wave had seemed to slow, and then halt its advance. But then Markarian had turned, diving back toward the plane. The Galaxy quickened to life, rushing to finish 30,000 years of history before the two ships returned. The wave surged on. Above the banquet table, one arm of the star-clotted spiral was shot through with green, like a mote of ink spreading into blotting paper. The edge of the green wave was



feathered, fractal, extending verdant tendrils.

"Do you have any observations?" Irravel asked.

"A few." Markarian sipped from his chalice. "I've studied the patterns of starlight among the suns already swallowed by the wave. They're not uniformly green – it's correlated with rotational angle. The green matter must be concentrated near the ecliptic, extending above and below it, but not encircling the stars completely."

Irravel thought back to what the Nestbuilder had shown here.

"Meaning what?" she asked, testing Markarian.

"Swarms of absorbing bodies, on orbits resembling comets, or asteroids. I think the greenfly machines must have dismantled everything smaller than a Jovian, then enveloped the rubble in transparent membranes which they filled with air, water and greenery – self-sustaining biospheres. Then they were cast adrift. Trillions of tiny worlds, around each star. No rocky planets any more."

Irravel retrieved a name from the deep past. "Like Dyson spheres?"

"Dyson clouds, perhaps."

"Do you think anyone survived? Are there niches in the wave where humans can live? That was the point of greenfly, after all: to create living space."

"Maybe," Markarian said, with no great conviction. "Perhaps some survivors found ways inside, as their own worlds were smashed and reassembled into the cloud..."

"But you don't think it's very likely?"

"I've been listening, Irravel – scanning the assimilated regions for any hint of an extant technological culture. If anyone did survive, they're either keeping deliberately quiet or they don't even know how to make a radio signal by accident."

"It was my fault, Markarian."

His tone was rueful. "Yes... I couldn't help but arrive at that conclusion."

"I never intended this."

"I think that goes without saying, wouldn't you? No one could have guessed the consequences of that one action."

"Would you?"

He shook his head. "In all likelihood, I'd have done exactly what you did."

"I did it out of love, Markarian. For the cargo."

"I know."

She believed him.

"What happened back there, Markarian? Why did you give up the codes when I didn't?"

"Because of what they did to you, Irravel."

He told her. How neither Markarian nor Irravel had shown any signs of revealing the codes under Mirsky's interrogation, until something new was tried.

"They were good at surgery," Markarian said. "Seven's crew swapped limbs and body parts as badges of status. They knew how to sever and splice nerves." The image didn't allow her to interrupt. "They cut your head off. Kept it alive in a state of borderline consciousness, and then showed it to me.

That's when I gave them the codes."

For a long while Irravel said nothing. Then it occurred to her to check her old body, still frozen in the same casket where Mirsky had once revealed it to her. She ordered some children to prepare the body for a detailed examination, then looked through their eyes. The microscopic evidence of reconnective surgery around the neck was too slight to have ever shown up unless one was looking for it. But now there was no mistaking it.

*I did it to save your neck*, Markarian had said, when she had held him pinned to the ice of Seven's ship.

"You seem to be telling the truth," she said, when she had released the children. "The nature of your betrayal was..." And then she paused, searching for the words, while Markarian watched her across the table. "Different than I assumed. Possibly less of a crime. But still a betrayal, Markarian."

"One I've lived with for 300 years of subjective time."

"You could have returned the sleepers alive at any time. I wouldn't have attacked you." But she didn't even sound convincing to herself.

"What now?" Markarian said. "Do we keep this distance, arguing until one of us has the nerve to strike against the other? I've Nestbuilder weapons as well, Irravel. I think I could rip you apart before you could launch a reprisal."

"You've had the opportunity to do so before. Perhaps you never had the nerve, though. What's changed now?"

Markarian's gaze flicked to the map. "Everything. I think we should see what happens before making any rash decisions, don't you?"

Irravel agreed.

She willed herself into stasis; medicines arresting all biological activity in every cell in her body. The 'chines would only revive her when something – anything – happened, on a Galactic timescale. Markarian would retreat into whatever mode of suspension he favoured, until woken by the same stimulus.

He was still sitting there when time resumed, as if only a moment had interrupted their conversation.

The wave had spread further now. It had eaten into the Galaxy for 10,000 light years around Sol – a third of the way to the core. There was no sign that it had encountered resistance – at least nothing that had done more than hinder it. There had never been many intelligent, starfaring cultures to begin with, the Nestbuilder had told her. Perhaps the few that existed were even now making plans to retard the wave. Or perhaps it had swallowed them, as it swallowed humanity.

"Why did we wake?" Irravel said. "Nothing's changed, except that it's become larger."

"Maybe not," Markarian said. "I had to be sure, but now I don't think there's any doubt. I've just detected a radio message from within the plane of the Galaxy; from within the wave."

"Yes?"

"Looks like someone survived after all."

The radio message was faint, but nothing else was transmitting on that or any adjacent frequency,

except for the senseless mush of cosmic background sources. It was also in a language they recognized.

"It's Canasian," Markarian said.

"Fand subdialect," Irravel added, marvellingly.

It was also beamed in their direction, from somewhere deep in the swathe of green, almost coincident with the position of a pulsar. The message was a simple one, frequency modulated around one and a half megahertz, repeated for a few minutes every day of Galactic time. Whoever was sending it clearly lacked the resources to transmit continuously. It was also coherent: amplified and beamed.

Someone wanted to speak to them.

The man's disembodied head appeared above the banquet table, chiselled from pixels. He was immeasurably old; a skull draped in parchment; something that should have been embalmed rather than talking.

Irravel recognized the face.

"It's him," she said, in Markarian's direction. "Remontoire. Somehow he made it across all this time."

Markarian nodded slowly. "He must have remembered us, and known where to look. Even across thousands of light years, we can still be seen. There can't be many objects still moving relativistically."

Remontoire told his story. His people had fled to the pulsar system 20,000 years ago – more so now, since his message had taken thousand of years to climb out of the Galaxy. They had seen the wave coming, as had thousands of other human factions, and like many they had observed that the wave shunned pulsars; burnt out stellar corpses rarely accompanied by planets. Some intelligence governing the wave must have recognized that pulsars were valueless; that even if a Dyson cloud could be created around them, there would be no sunlight to focus.

For thousands of years they had waited around the pulsar, growing ever more silent and cautious, seeing other cultures make errors which drew the wave upon them, for by now it interpreted any other intelligence as a threat to its progress, assimilating the weapons used against it.

Then – over many more thousands of years – Remontoire's people saw the wave learn, adapting like a vast neural net, becoming curious about those few pulsars which harboured planets. Soon their place of refuge would become nothing of the sort.

"Help us," Remontoire said. "Please."

It took 3,000 years to reach them.

For most of that time, Remontoire's people acted on faith, not knowing that help was on its way. During the first thousand years they abandoned their system, compressing their population down to a sustaining core of only a few hundred thousand. Together with the cultural data they'd preserved during the long centuries of their struggle against the wave, they packed their survivors into a single hollowed-out rock and flung themselves out of the ecliptic using a mass-driver which fuelled itself from the rock's own bulk. They called it Hope. A million decoys had to be launched, just to ensure that Hope got through the

surrounding hordes of assimilating machines.

Inside, most of the Conjoiners slept out the 2,000 years of solitude before Irravel and Markarian reached them.

"Hope would make an excellent shield," Markarian mused, as they approached it. "If one of us considered a pre-emptive strike against the other?"

"Don't think I wouldn't."

They moved their ships to either side of the dark shard of rock, extended field grapples, then hauled in.

"Then why don't you?" Markarian said.

For a moment Irravel didn't have a good answer. When she found one, she wondered why it hadn't been more obvious before. "Because they need us more than I need revenge."

"A higher cause?"

"Redemption," she said.

### **Hope; Galactic Plane – AD circa 40,000**

They didn't have long. Their approach, diving down from Galactic North, had drawn the attention of the wave's machines, directing them toward the one rock which mattered. A wall of annihilation was moving toward them at half the speed of light. When it reached Hope, it would turn it into the darkest of nebulae.

Conjoiners boarded the *Hirondelle* and invited Irravel into the Hope. The hollowed-out chambers of the rock were Edenic to her children, after all the decades of subjective time they'd spent aboard since last planetfall. But it was a doomed paradise, the biomes grey with neglect, as if the Conjoiners had given up long ago.

Remontoire welcomed Irravel next to a rockpool filmed in grey dust. Half the sun-panels set into the distant honeycombed ceiling were black.

"You came," he said. He wore a simple smock and trousers. His anatomy was early-model Conjoiner: almost fully human.

"You're not him, are you. You look like him – sound like him – but the image you sent us was of someone much older."

"I'm sorry. His name was chosen for its familiarity; my likeness shaped to his. We searched our collective memories and found the experiences of the one you knew as Remontoire... but that was a long time ago, and he was never known by that name to us."

"What his name?"

"Even your Juggler cortex could not accommodate it, Irravel."

She had to ask. "Did he make it back to a commune?"

"Yes, of course," the man said, as if her question was foolish. "How else could we have absorbed his experiences back into the Transenlightenment?"

"And did he forgive me?"

"I forgive you now," he said. "It amounts to the same thing."

She willed herself to think of him as Remontoire.

The Conjoiners hadn't allowed themselves to progress in all the thousands of years they waited around the pulsar, fearing that any social change – no matter how slight – would eventually bring the wave upon them. They had studied it, contemplated

weapons they might use against it – but other than that, all they had done was wait.

They were very good at waiting.

"How many refugees did you bring?"

"One hundred thousand." Before Irravel could answer, Remontoire shook his head. "I know; too many. Perhaps half that number can be carried away on your ships. But half is better than nothing."

She thought back to her own sleepers. "I know. Still, we might be able to take more... I don't know about Markarian's ship, but—"

He cut her off, gently. "I think you'd better come with me," said Remontoire, and then led her aboard the *Hideyoshi*.

"How much of it did you explore?"

"Enough to know there's no one alive anywhere in this ship," Remontoire said. "If there are 200 cryogenically-frozen sleepers, we didn't find them."

"No sleepers?"

"Just this one."

What they'd arrived at was a plinth, supporting a reefersleep casket, encrusted with gold statuary; spacesuited figures with hands folded across their chests like resting saints. The glass lid of the casket was veined with fractures; the withered figure inside older than time. Markarian's skeletal frame was swaddled in layers of machines, all of archaic provenance. His skull had split open, a fused mass spilling out like lava.

"Is he dead?" Irravel asked.

"Depends what you mean by dead." The Conjoiner's hand sketched across the neural mass. "His organic mind must have been completely swamped by machines centuries ago. His linkage to the *Hideyoshi* would have been total. There would have been very little point discriminating between the two."

"Why didn't he tell me what had become of him?"

"No guarantee he knew. Once he was in this state, with his personality running entirely on machine substrates, he could have edited his own memories and perceptual inputs – deceiving himself that he was still corporeal."

Irravel looked away from the casket, forcing troubling questions from her mind. "Is his personality still running the ship?"

"We detected only caretaker programs; capable of imitating him when the need arose, but lacking sentience."

"Is that all there was?"

"No." Remontoire reached through one of the casket's larger fractures, prising something from Markarian's fingers. It was a sliver of computer memory. "We examined this already, though not in great detail. It's partitioned into 190 areas, each large enough to hold complete neural and genetic maps for one human being, encoded into superposed electron states on Rydberg atoms."

She took the sliver from him. It didn't feel like much. "He burned the sleepers onto this?"

"Three hundred years is much longer than any of

them expected to sleep. By scanning them he lost nothing."

"Can you retrieve them?"

"It would not be trivial," the Conjoiner said. "But given time, we could do it. Assuming any of them would welcome being born again, so far from home."

She thought of the infected Galaxy hanging below them, humming with the chill sentience of machines. "Maybe the kindest thing would be to simulate the past," she said. "Recreate Yellowstone, and revive them on it, as if nothing had ever gone wrong."

"Is that what you're advocating?"

"No," she said, after toying with the idea in all seriousness. "We need all the genetic diversity we can get, if we're going to establish a new branch of humanity outside the Galaxy."

She thought about it. Soon they would witness Hope's destruction, as the wave of machines tore through it with the mindlessness of stampeding animals. Some of them might try and follow the *Hirondelle*, but so far the machines moved too slowly to catch the ship, even if they forced it back toward Galactic North.

Where was there to go?

There were globular clusters high above the Galaxy – tightly packed shoals of old stars where the wave hadn't reached, but where fragments of humanity might have already sought refuge. If the clusters proved unwelcoming, there were high-latitude stars, flung from the Galaxy a billion years ago, and some might have dragged their planetary systems with them. If those failed – and it would be tens of thousands of years before the possibilities were exhausted – the *Hirondelle* could always loop around toward Galactic South and search there, striking out for the Clouds of Magellan. Ultimately, of course – if any part or fragment of Irravel's children still clung to humanity, and remembered where they'd come from, and what had become of it, they would want to return to the Galaxy, even if that meant confronting the wave.

*But they would return.*

"That's the plan then?" Remontoire said.

Irravel shrugged, turning away from the plinth where Markarian lay. "Unless you've got a better one."

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**Alastair Reynolds's** previous stories for this magazine have included "Byrd Land Six" (issue 96), "Spirey and the Queen" (issue 108), "A Spy in Europa" (issue 120), "On the Oodnadatta" (issue 128) and "Stroboscopic" (issue 134). Recently, he has been commissioned to write three sf novels for Orion/Gollancz. Originally from Wales, he continues to live in the Netherlands and to work in astronomy.



## ANSIBLE LINK



DAVID LANGFORD

**Virus Alert!** The cryptic appearance of "Michael Arthur C. Clarke" in the *Interzone* 143 Ansible Link column ("I never wrote that!" – D. Langford) indicates an outbreak of the dread Michael computer virus, triggered by *IZ* deadlines. Thought to be at risk are Michael Christopher Priest, who spotted this, Michael Michael Swanwick and Iain Michael Banks.

## FOR FEAR OF LITTLE MEN

**Adolfo Bioy Casares** (1914-1999), the Argentine author and anthologist, died on 8 March aged 84. His work is very highly admired in Argentina, though his reputation outside was overshadowed by that of long-time friend and collaborator Jorge Luis Borges. One notable translated anthology is *The Book of Fantasy* (1980 UK), ed. with Borges and Bioy Casares's wife Silvina Ocampo.

**John Broome**, writer of the early *Green Lantern* comics, died in April aged 85. He had retired from comics in 1970.

**Pat Cadigan** still uses the D-word: "I write to take serious issue with Jane Johnson's statement [see *IZ* 142] about all writers being 'a little bit mad.' I don't know who she's been having lunch with lately, but I, for one, am not 'a little bit mad.' I am full-tilt bonkers, and probably dangerous as well. Hope this clears up any confusion. You dog."

**Andrew J. Offutt** had a heart attack in March, followed shortly by quadruple bypass surgery. A full recovery is expected.

**Christopher Priest** grumbled that his pseudonym John Luther Novak, used when novelizing the new David Cronenberg sf-and-biological-yuck movie *eXistenZ*, "has become one of the worst-kept secrets in publishing." Open the book and the very first sentence inside explains that JLN "is the

pen-name of award-winning novelist Christopher Priest."

**Oliver Reed** the well-known actor died on 2 May aged 61. Some of his genre movies made it into the SF and Fantasy Encyclopedias: *The Curse of the Werewolf* (1961), *The Two Faces of Dr Jekyll* (1960); *The Damned* (1961), *The Devils* (1971), *Z.P.G.* (1971), *The Brood* (1979), *Dr Heckyl and Mr Hype* (1980), *Adventures of Baron Munchausen* (1989), *The House of Usher* (1989) and *The Pit and the Pendulum* (1990).

## INFINITELY IMPROBABLE

**Nebula Awards ...** Short: Bruce Holland Rogers, "Thirteen Ways to Water" (*Black Cats and Broken Mirrors*). Novelette: Jane Yolen, "Lost Girls" (*Realms of Fantasy* 2/98). Novella: Sheila Finch, "Reading the Bones" (*F&SF* 1/98). Novel: Joe Haldeman, *Forever Peace*. Author Emeritus: Philip Klass (William Tenn). Grandmaster: Hal Clement. The Ray Bradbury dramatic achievement award was picked up by J. M. Straczynski for *Babylon 5*; this plus the Tenn and Clement awards were pre-announced to lessen the suspense.

**As Others See Us.** A TV & Satellite *Week* (10-16 April) feature on *Event Horizon* star Laurence Fishburne dwelt on his delight at playing a brave, competent black space captain in the movie, since he's much concerned about positive portrayals of African-Americans. After mentioning his further virtuous efforts as a UNICEF ambassador, the magazine deftly delivered its punchline: "With serious views like these, it is perhaps surprising to discover that Fishburne is a sci-fi fan."

**Hugo Nominations.** The list goes on forever. Here are the nominees in the two most popular categories... Novel (332 ballots cast): *Children of God*, Mary Doria Russell; *Darwinia*, Robert Charles Wilson; *Distraction*, Bruce Sterling; *Factoring Humanity*, Robert J. Sawyer; *To Say Nothing of the Dog*, Connie Willis. Dramatic Presentation (261 ballots): *Babylon 5* "Sleeping in Light," *Dark City*, *Pleasantville*, *Star Trek: Insurrection*, *The Truman Show*. Besides *Dark City*, local nominees from Australia—venue of the 1999 World SF Convention where the Hugos will be presented—are Greg Egan with "Oceanic" (novella) and "The Planck Dive" (novelette), Nick Stathopoulos (pro artist), the newsletter *Thyme* (fanzine), and the late Ian Gunn (fan artist). *Interzone* got its usual semi-prozine nomination, and ecstatic cries of boredom greeted the appearance of *Ansible* (fanzine) and some guy called Langford (fanwriter). Michael Swanwick, unprecedentedly, has three of the six short-story nominations: "For once

I am pretty much guaranteed to have a story rank higher than fifth place in the voting. A modest accomplishment, perhaps, but mine own."

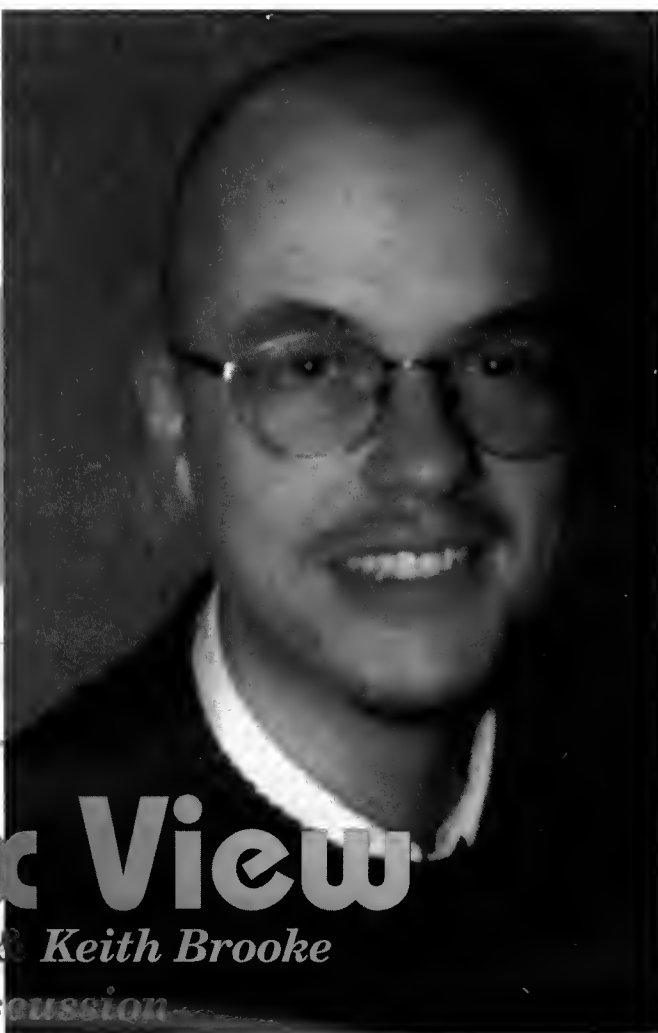
**Ho Ho Very Satirical.** Comics writer Peter David has devised a sinister new breed of villain, a Kali-worshipping death cult that tries to influence young children via a TV sf programme called (readers of a nervous disposition should turn the page now) *TeleThuggies*.

**Footnote.** Harry Harrison reminisces on the *IZ* 141 obituary of EC's Joe Orlando: "Joe Orlando started as Wally Wood's assistant, became an adept Wood-style artist. Worked with Harvey Kirtzman on the parody of *Little Orphan Annie* called *Little Annie Fanny*; I think it was in *Playboy*. Saw him last in NY when he was one of the editors of *Mad*. They all hated me there because I told the True Story of EC comics to a comic fanzine. Joe whispered to me that I was right."

**Sidewise Awards** for alternate history, 1999 shortlist ... Long: Greg Bear, *Dinosaur Summer*; Stephen Fry, *Making History*; Pamela Sargent, *Climb the Wind*. Short (<60,000 words): Stephen Baxter & Arthur C. Clarke, "The Wire Continuum" (*Playboy* 1/98); Ian R. MacLeod, "The Summer Isles" (*Asimov's* 10/98); Robert Silverberg, "Waiting for the End" (*Asimov's* 10/98); Howard Waldrop, "US" (*Event Horizon*).

**UFO Corner.** Knowing of my morbid interest in Whitley Strieber and those Alien Greys with their strange proctological obsessions, author Greg Frost passes on the latest theory: "It has recently been proposed that the alien ships in fact run on methane, and they aren't remotely interested in the human posterior; they are simply refueling."

**Thog's Masterclass.** "In her new, improved mood, Thea didn't even mind the unfortunate presence of Glenda Rossner and the heat-seeking missile that passed for Glenda's mouth." ... "Biederman also knew how to avoid hanging himself with his own tongue." ... "Now, every time she checked, the answering machine was flashing like a festering boil." ... "Thea's stomach fisted." (all Judith Kelman, *One Last Kiss*, 1994) "Serpents. Nightmare apparitions of gelatinous flesh that hardened on the instant to steel-cable sinew and muscle. Serpentine forms of protoplasm that ripped and tore with tentacular pseudopods as they streaked like lightning through the air, frightful jaws agape for prey. Serpents that were neither reptile, animal nor insect, but giant amoebae evolved to giant size and appalling activity." (Frank Edward Arnold, "The Twilight People" in *Wings Across Time*, 1946)



# Parallax View

*Eric Brown & Keith Brooke*  
*in discussion*

Photo Keith Brooke by Allison Brooke

**K**eith Brooke and Eric Brown are two long-standing members of the *Interzone* generation: the group of mainly UK-based writers whose careers have grown around this magazine.

Both started publishing short fiction in the late 1980s: first Brown with "Krash-Bangg Joe and the Pineal Zen Equation" in Autumn 1987 and then Brooke (after two small-press stories) with "Adrenotropic Man" in July 1989. Each had a story in Chris Evans and Rob Holdstock's *Other Edens 3*, and they met at the book launch in September 1989.

Brooke has published four novels to date: *Keepers of the Peace*, *Expatria* and *Expatria Incorporated* (all Gollancz hardcovers and Corgi paperbacks) and *Lord of Stone* (self-published on the web at <http://www.iplus.zetnet.co.uk/kbrooke/stone/>). In 1997 he launched the online sf and fantasy fiction archive, *infinity plus* (<http://www.iplus.zetnet.co.uk/>), which has gone on to publish around half a million words of fiction from

60 professional authors. Family commitments meant he had to get a real job in the early 1990s and now he fits his writing and online publishing activities around his growing young family and his work looking after the University of Essex website.

Brown has written seven books to date: the novels *Meridian Days*, *Engineman* (both Pan), *Penumbra* (Millennium); the collections *The Time-Lapsed Man and Other Stories* and *Blue Shifting* (both Pan); and the children's Web books *Untouchable* and *Walkabout* (both Orion Dolphin). He's published around 50 sf short stories in magazines and anthologies in Britain and the US. Last year he adapted Stephen Baxter's short story "George and the Comet" as "George and the Red Giant" for the Seeing Ear Theater in New York. His website, *Blue Shifting*, is at <http://members.aol.com/fericb/index.htm>

Their previous collaborations for *Interzone* are the short stories, "Appassionata," "Sugar and Spice" and "Under Antares."

**Keith Brooke:** I suppose in one sense, we've collaborated almost as long as we've known each other. Back in 1991 my publishers wanted some changes making to *Expatria Incorporated* which I wasn't too sure about. You and Steve Baxter very kindly agreed to look at the manuscript and I ended up making most of the changes Gollancz and the two of you suggested and the novel was much stronger as a result. Ever since then, we've critted each other's work before it's submitted, so I suppose all stories appearing under our names are collaborations to some extent. I know my stories are better as a result.

**Eric Brown:** Having work criticized is a scary and fascinating process. Like collaboration, it isn't something you'd undertake with anyone. There's trust involved, and a recognition of the other person's ability and insight. Over the years I've given many people my stories to read and comment on, and in general I've found that their comments were either too flattering, or that they missed the point of what I was doing. It's great when you come across the rare person who's on your wavelength and can dissect a

tale, point out where it's going wrong, and what needs to be done to fix it.

As for collaborating on stories...

**Brooke:** I remember walking back from the pub with you one night in Haworth and tentatively asking what you thought about the idea of collaboration. You said you couldn't see how it could work, you didn't like talking about ideas until you'd written the story. I pretty much felt the same (although simultaneously I was intrigued by the idea of collaborating) so I didn't mention it again.

**Brown:** The night is lost in the after-effects of too much Timothy Taylor's Best Bitter – but I know why I was reluctant. Two main things. One was that I probably thought that collaborations were never as good as single-author stories – they were either compromises, or third-rate stories worked over by a second hand. (Which is perhaps true in some cases – but not in others, for example the Pohl/Kornbluth collaborations.) The second reason for my reluctance was more personal. I was unwilling to share with someone the rather inept way I go about thinking up and plotting a story. (The route from original idea to finished product is long and tortuous, involving many detours, discarded ideas, completely off-the-track speculation...) To articulate an idea for a story to someone would be to open up the creaky way my brain works. However, as I recall, our first collaboration wasn't built up from an original idea, was it?

**Brooke:** You sent me a story you weren't happy with, called "The Girl Who Loved Beethoven." You knew it didn't work, but said you didn't know how to fix it. You wanted to get on with your new novel and you said you were just going to put "The Girl Who..." away and forget about it.

I read the story and, although it needed a fair bit of work, I saw quite clearly how to do it. When I'm workshopping someone else's story I always try to resist the temptation to wade in and say, "You should be doing it like *this*." It's a process of finding the right questions to ask, rather than supplying my own answers. But the thought of such a striking idea simply being discarded was too much for me and I suggested that if you really *were* going to abandon the story then maybe I could do something with it. I was wary of intruding on your territory – it was your story, after all – but you responded enthusiastically. So I took the story to pieces, built it up again and then we bounced it back and forth by post so many times that I suspect neither of us could confidently

*"Writing's not exactly  
a spectator sport,  
but that's about  
as close as it gets"*

say who contributed which elements. That story became "Appassionata" (*Interzone*, July 1996).

**Brown:** We did a couple more stories like this. From my point of view it was nice to see stories that I liked – but that I had to admit didn't work – turn into good pieces. What amazed me with the finished results was not only that they worked, and worked well, but that you'd incorporated your own take into the story and produced something that I, alone, would have had no chance of accomplishing. I think this synergy is the true benefit of collaborating.

**Brooke:** It's funny the way it works: I always feel that I've contributed less than my 50% worth to any of our collaborations, yet you insist that *you've* done less than half. And yet the result is something neither of us could have written on our own... What is it, do you think, that makes a writing partnership work?

**Brown:** Well, it's necessary to know and trust the other person – at least, I know it is in my case. Also, you need to believe in the other writer's ability. I think we're very much on the same wavelength in terms of interests, views, outlook. We're good friends and there's certainly no ego problem about who should do what in a story, or who's name should go first, stuff like

that. I'd find it hard to write a story that meant anything with someone I'd never met, or didn't particularly like.

I've collaborated on two stories with Steve Baxter, another friend. We have very different writing styles, and approaches to science fiction. What happened was that I had a couple of ideas for hard sf stories – with the disadvantage of knowing nothing about science. Steve deconstructed the ideas, told me why they wouldn't work, and then we set about building them back up. The result was two stories I certainly wouldn't even have attempted solo, "Sunfly" in *Interzone* 100 (October 1995), and "The Space-time Pit" in *Interzone* 107 (May 1996).

**Brooke:** I think it's possible to roughly categorize sf authors into two schools: those who do sf, and those who use it. Steve is one of the best doers in the business, with the big science-fictional idea always central, and the story and character a means of exploration. You and I are users, taking established sf tropes, twisting them and remixing them into something that we hope is new: the ideas in an Eric Brown story are often striking, but they are always secondary to the exploration of plot and character. The extra something in a Baxter/Brown story comes from the space between your two approaches; I suppose the extra something in a Brooke/Brown story comes from where we overlap and reinforce each other.

**Brown:** I think that what you add to the collaborations is a keener intelligence and a logical approach; you never let me get away with any scientific sloppiness or convenience, which I'd be quite happy to use in my own stories if so doing aided my overall intent – the communication to the reader of emotional intensity and atmosphere. As far as I'm concerned the science in my stories is secondary, and often not even that.

**Brooke:** The process of collaboration has moved on from my early reworkings of your stories. Most recently, you came down for a weekend and on the Sunday we locked ourselves away and brainstormed a story virtually from scratch. In the space of a couple of hours we went through a process that, working independently, would take us a fortnight or more: expanding the initial idea, discarding elements that didn't work, bouncing plot twists and speculations back and forth until we had something just waiting to be written. Writing's not exactly a spectator sport, but that's about as close as it gets...

For the rest of the week I wrote in the evenings after work until the



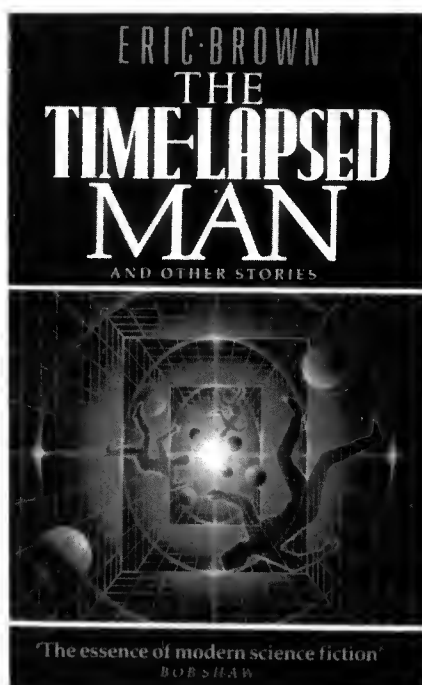
story was well under way, then I e-mailed the part-written story to you (so much faster than relying on snail mail, as we used to!). You picked it up, continued the story (I don't know what you've done with it, but I'm looking forward to reading it), and sent it back to me a week later. Now I have a 10,000-word file sitting here, waiting for me to write the closing scenes. And then the thing will go through the usual process of revision, shuttling back and forth between Essex and Yorkshire until we think it's ready to send out into the world.

If only the history of our collaborative collection had been as smooth... As I recall it, we both had the idea of collecting our stories together in book-form independently.

**Brown:** But it was you who actually got the ball rolling. You were in contact with Anthony Barker at Tanjen Books, a small-press outfit based in Leicestershire. We signed a contract for a modest fee and the collection, entitled *Parallax View*, was due out in May this year. It contained our five collaborations, and a solo tale by each of us – plus a fantastic introduction by Steve [Baxter]. I was looking forward to seeing the collection in print – Tanjen produced lovely-looking books, and they were stories I believed in. And then, due to financial troubles beyond Anthony's control, Tanjen went out of business. I was pissed off, to put it mildly. It was the second book to be contracted for and then never published. (Pan bought my fix-up book *The Fall of Tartarus*, way back in 1995, only to scrap the title when they dumped me and a whole load of other sf authors.) Still, I'm hopeful that *Parallax* will sell elsewhere, in time.

**Brooke:** Our writing backgrounds couldn't really be more strongly contrasting, could they? I wrote a handful of stories as a student then, after graduating, I took a year out and sold *Interzone* the first story I wrote during that period. Then I wrote a novel and ended up with a three-book deal with Gollancz. It wasn't quite an overnight success, but it all happened very fast.

The first novel, *Keepers of the Peace*, was my angry young man novel: an answer to that unpleasant right-wing sub-genre of military sf. I wanted to write something that appeared to fit into that category but subverted it, something that might make a few teenaged boys question the mindset of some of the writers they enjoyed. It's a thoroughly flawed book, of course, but it still means a lot to me. I followed it up with *Expatria* and *Expatria Incorporated*, high-spirited sf adventure stories, set on a low-tech colony world that's lost touch with the rest of



humankind. The novels are the culmination of my GenGen future history: Max Riesling, the protagonist of my first *Interzone* story, has become the figurehead of a new capitalist technoreligion whose leaders want to recover their abandoned assets on Expatria.

**Brown:** Why did you turn to self-publishing with *Lord of Stone*?

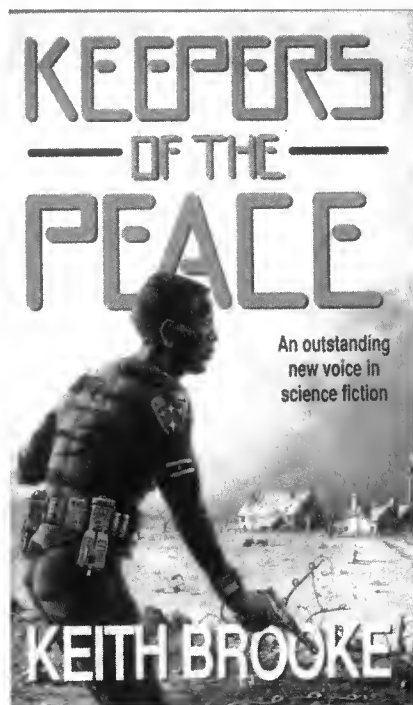
**Brooke:** Put simply: because no one else would do it and I still believe that the novel is better than anything else I've had published.

If anything, I was successful too early and have had a lot of learning to do in the years that followed. After the

first three novels I thought I could do whatever I wanted. With the best possible intentions, my editors told me to write my important book next. I thought the timing was right: I'd written a serious book, then two "entertainments," so it was time for something a bit heavier. So I wrote a war novel that was consciously influenced by Orwell's *Homage to Catalonia*. *Lord of Stone* is about the death of magic in a secular world, a fantasy thriller without much fantasy, set in an early-20th-century world that wasn't quite our own. Despite the fact that it didn't fit any of the neat publishing categories, Gollancz said for a time that they wanted to publish it, then for some unexplained reason they changed their minds. The book did the rounds, but never found a home, and I finally realized that it was time to put it away and forget about it. Or put it on the web, which I did in December 1998. It's published as careware: if someone reads it and enjoys it, I hope they'll give a few quid to one of the charities named on the website.

You wrote for years before the breakthrough came – I don't think anyone could accuse you of succeeding too quickly. To anyone who doesn't write, that kind of persistence might appear, er, obsessive... What kept you going?

**Brown:** Well, er, obsession, in a word. And ignorance. I left school at 14 when I emigrated to Australia with my family. I was a poor pupil, in the D stream of my year, a lazy dunce who couldn't care less. All I was interested in was football. When I had the opportunity to leave school at 14 and never go back, I grasped it with both hands. I'd never read a novel to that point, and I think it was nostalgia for England that made me read *Cards on the Table* by Agatha Christie when my mother suggested I try it. That book, I can safely say, changed my life. For however many hours I was living in a different world, with a different perspective. It was pure escapism, and I loved it. I've been an obsessive reader – escaper – ever since. Within two days of reading the Christie, I was writing my own whodunit. From then on I knew I wanted to be a writer. Then I came across a collection of stories by Robert Silverberg, *Sundance*, and at the same time Wells's *War of the Worlds* – and I was converted. For the next ten years, four in Australia and six on my return to England, I locked myself away and wrote a couple of hundred short stories and around 20 novels. It was pure, obsessive escapism. I *must* have thought that one day I might get something published, but at the back of my mind was the self-confidence thing, or rather the lack of: I was from a working-class



background with no education, so how the hell did I hope to become a writer? It got to the point where I put so much work in, that I couldn't stop. After ten years of non-stop writing (while doing factory work) I took a year off and travelled around India, writing there, too, but non-fiction, descriptive pieces, impressions. I came back at the age of 25 and the liberating experience of travel around a country as vast and alien as India, combined with the technique I'd built up through writing so much garbage over the past decade, paid off. I began writing the short stories that eventually appeared in *Interzone*, *Other Edens*, *Zenith II*.

**Brooke:** That's exactly the kind of background I always envied: so much material, so much exotic imagery to cut and paste into stories! I came from a comfortably middle-class family, living in a very ordinary town and it took me a long time to realize what a rich source of material that background contained: a lot of my near-future sf leans on that background, a lot my horror stories are set in a twisted version of the seaside town where I grew up.

**Brown:** What made you begin writing – how did you get your first break?

**Brooke:** Fear of accountancy played a large part. In the mid- to late-1980s just about any reasonably numerate graduate was pushed towards a career in accountancy and I drifted through the interviews, accepted a job offer... and then the shock struck home. What was I doing? My wife-to-be, Alison, suggested I take a year out to write full-time. And so on the

strength of two small-press acceptances I became a full-time writer. As soon as I finished the first draft, I knew that the first story I wrote in that period was a significant step up from what I'd been writing before, and sure enough it sold to *Interzone*.

I started work on *Keepers of the Peace* and pretty soon I was hooked. As the stories started to sell, my "year out" extended itself. The novel did the rounds and received some encouraging rejection letters. I came so close to abandoning it: the only publisher left on my list was Corgi, but they didn't publish that kind of thing and I nearly didn't bother trying them. But I did and Julia Smith plucked it out of her towering slush pile and showed it to Colin Murray and I started to hear through the grapevine that they were interested. In the meantime I'd written *Expatria*, and I heard at a convention that the slush reader at Gollancz had recommended it. So I appointed an agent – your agent – who worked out a three-book deal between the two companies, with Gollancz to do the hardbacks and Corgi to do the paperbacks.

**Brown:** And what are you working on at the moment?

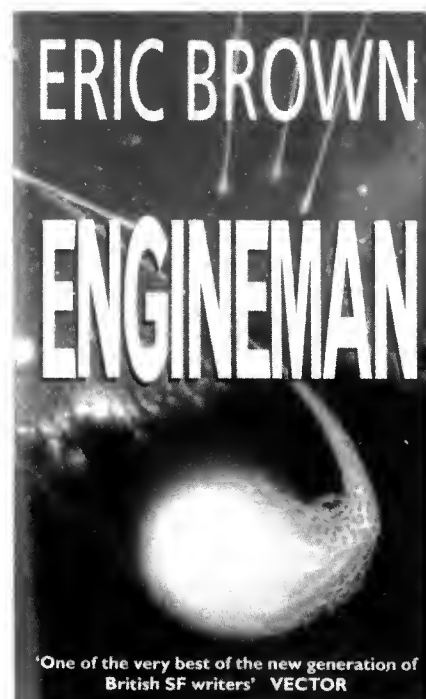
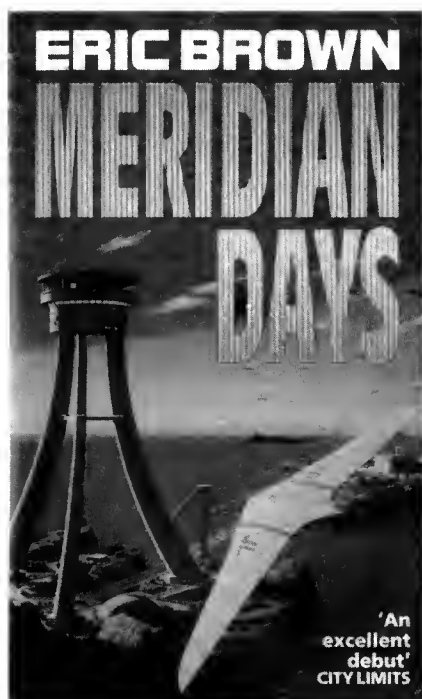
**Brooke:** These days I have to fit the writing in around my family and day job. A lot of my time over the last few years has been taken up with a fantasy novel based on an early *Interzone* story, "Riding the Serpent's Back," but I've also been keeping the short stories going and scaring children under a pen-name. And there's *infinity plus*, of course: as I've written before in this magazine, what started

out as a collective showcase to promote the work of myself and a few other writers has turned into one of the biggest sources of professional genre fiction on the WWW. I still find it somewhat difficult to believe that the site has so many high-class contributors – Michael Moorcock, Kit Reed, Greg Egan, Terry Bisson and Vonda McIntyre, to name just five. And it keeps growing.

You've been quite productive lately, haven't you? Two novels published already this year...

**Brown:** Yes, both came out in March: the children's Web book *Walkabout*, and the sf novel *Penumbra*. The children's book in the Web series (my first was *Untouchable*, Orion Dolphin,) came about when Simon Spanton, editor at Orion, had an idea for a series of linked young-adult adventure stories set in the year 2026, featuring a cast of international characters with access to virtual reality – the Web of the title. I loved doing the two novels. The first was set in India, the second in Australia, so I used a lot of what I saw and experienced in both countries. One of the gratifying things about the Web books, apart from working with a good editor and good writers, was the room for manoeuvre in the novels: we were tied to a common background, but the subject of a virtual world opened up a lot of interesting possibilities and scenarios. So far the series has been translated into half a dozen languages, at the last count.

*Penumbra* is an sf adventure story, a space opera along the lines of *Engineman*, though not set in the same future



as that novel. I use three viewpoint characters – a device I find useful to crank up the tension and move the story along. The central character is Josh Bennett, a jaded tug pilot (in the words of the back-cover blurb) whose life as the novel opens is a series of disasters and misfortunes. The second viewpoint character is Rana Rao, an Indian police officer on the trail of a serial killer (the third viewpoint character) in a future Calcutta. (Yet again I get to use India as a backdrop.) I suppose the novel is about the redemption of Bennett, the discovery of a universal Buddhist-analogue religion, with lashings of space operatic der-ring-do.

**Brooke:** And since finishing those two books you've committed trilogy, haven't you?

**Brown:** Okay, I admit it. I called the books, unoriginally, the Virtual Reality trilogy: *Virtual Nights*, *Virtual Blues* and *Virtual*

*Dreams*. And then you pointed out that not only were the titles clichéd, but something like them had been done before – and Simon at Orion agreed. So at the moment the books are untitled. I've written two so far, and hope to get the last book in the bag by the middle of next year.

They're thrillers set in New York in the year 2040. The central characters, Hal Halliday and Barney Kluger, run a missing persons investigative agency, and virtual reality is starting up as the first book opens. The novels chart the growth of VR from a mere form of entertainment to a way of life – but, as ever with my stuff, the characters and their problems are in the forefront. The first book will be out in March, 2000.

**Brooke:** I know we have broadly similar tastes in sf, but who were your early influences, and who are you reading these days in the genre?

**Brown:** Silverberg was a big influence when I was

younger. I began reading him at about 15, devoured all his early stuff and loved it – *The Master of Life and Death*, *The Seed of Earth*, *Collision Course*, all great adventures. Then I came across his masterpieces, *Dying Inside*, *Thorns*, *Son of Man...* novels surely among the finest sf ever written. I like Michael Coney's books, especially *Hello Summer*, *Goodbye* and *The Girl with a Symphony in her*

favourite writers in the genre are Kim Stanley Robinson, Ian McDonald (if you haven't read *Chaga* yet, you really should!) and Robert Charles Wilson. And, like you, I'd rate Silverberg's *Dying Inside* as one of the finest novels of all time. For a long time, most of my pleasure reading was outside sf – I'm a great fan of Ian McEwan, Graham Greene and William Boyd – but the reviewing tends to get in the way of that these days.

In fact, one of my biggest problems at the moment is simply not having enough time to fit everything in. I have a stack of review copies sitting by my desk; I'm working on a novel and our new collaborative story; I have a busy job at the University; I have a young family (eight-year-old George, five-year-old Molly, and four-year-old twins Ed and Daisy). And on top of all that, we've moved house twice in the last six months...



Keith Brooke (left) by Brett Burridge; Eric Brown by Paul Brazier

*Fingers*. These days I'm reading Jack Vance, Richard Paul Russo, Robert Charles Wilson. His *The Harvest* is tremendous. What about you? I know you review a lot of the latest titles for *infinity plus*... Do you get to read much for pleasure?

**Brooke:** One of the great things about being publisher of *infinity plus* is that I get first pick of the review copies! The only problem is I can't keep *all* the good ones for myself... My

**Brown:** Makes my life seem an oasis of calm by comparison! Other than writing, I occupy my time with football – playing twice a week – my allotment and the local flower and vegetable association, of which I'm the Treasurer. I also write reviews for a Website devoted to the curry houses of Bradford – people have said that it contains my finest fictions. You can see the Bradford Curry Guide at <http://ds.dial.pipex.com/town/park/yfr60/>

**Brooke:** You were up for the BSFA short-fiction award again this year, weren't you?

**Brown:** Yes, for "Vulpheous," from *Interzone* 129. It came second by one vote.

**Brooke:** I suppose I should have voted for you.

**Brown:** Obviously the bribe wasn't big enough...

**Brooke:** Enough. Thanks for talking.

**Brown:** And thank you.





The bond was strong, even this far from the ship. Fluxmaster Julius Frayn stood on the hotel patio and stared out across the city. The million lights of the African capital scintillated like the massed stars of a galactic nebula. Above the cries of beggars and merchants in the teeming streets, the *Oh Carrollian's* mental echo rang across the kilometre from the 'port, a siren song loud in his cerebellum.

On occasions Frayn felt that his status was more a curse than the great gift that others claimed.

He turned his attention from the sprawl of night-time Nairobi, alerted by a sound in the bushes directly below. A quick shadow approached at a run through the darkness. Frayn hardly had time to register alarm before he made out another figure following the first. There was a tussle as one figure wrestled the other to the ground.

"Hannor?" he called.

"Master..." Hannor's taciturn reply reassured him.

Seconds later Hannor emerged from the shadows, frog-marching a thin man before him. Hannor was tall, his scaled body swathed in the green robe of his rank, Frayn's Second.

"I wanted only to speak to the fluxmaster!" the thin man protested. "I mean no harm!"

Hannor marched the man onto the patio and paused before Frayn. The Cyntherans blunt, turtle visage jutted from the shadows of his cowl; he nodded towards the thin man, his brief gesture asking Frayn what he should do with the intruder. Frayn was closer to the alien than he was to any human, yet they only ever communicated easily in the dreamflux.

"You choose a bizarre method of approach," Frayn observed.

The man struggled in Hannor's grip. "I was merely taking a stroll. I saw you and hurried over we were never introduced at the party, and I wanted to talk. Then this... this monster attacked me..."

Frayn regarded the man. "If you wish to speak to me, then speak." He nodded to Hannor to release his captive.

The man collected his dignity, drew himself up to his full height, and met the fluxmaster's eyes with the confidence of wealth.

Frayn had noticed him earlier, in the hotel ballroom: in his mid-to-late-30s, fashionably under-dressed in thong and knee-boots, his body skeletal, mutilated by a repeated pattern of runic scars and tattoos. Frayn recognized the symbol of the Rationalist cadre scored into the man's chest.

He had flitted around the gathering like a bee in a field of clover: a few words here, a joke there.

So arrogant and so rich: Frayn saw no reason to revise his initial dislike of the man.

The party was still going on, somewhere in the depths of the hotel. Throbbing music spilled out across the patio.

"Master Frayn of the *Oh Carrollian*?" the man asked, more hesitantly than Frayn had expected. Almost respectful.

He nodded, looking past the man and out across the city. To be back in the cavernous interior of his ship now, reunited with Elisabetha! Away from the petty demands of the world, away from the expectations.

"You are the talk of the party," the stranger said, as if this were likely to impress Frayn.

The fluxmaster laughed dismissively. "I am the talk of every 'port I visit on this corrupt little backwater of a planet," he said.

Fluxships were far more efficient than conventional starships and the new fluxship-derived constructs, their method of propulsion considered magical by the uninitiated. Frayn and his crew were regarded with something close to awe by the planet's citizens, and hatred by the owners of the lines whose business was suffering in competition against his ship.

Frayn had been on Earth for almost five years now; far, far too long, according to his crew.

"What do you want?" Frayn asked. They always wanted something, if only the kudos of having spent some time with the fluxmaster, a man in tune with

# The Flight of the *Oh Carrollian*

*Keith Brooke & Eric Brown*

the enigmatic flow of time and space.

The other man averted his gaze. "I..." he started, then stopped. "I understand that you are bound for Shanghai. I wish to buy passage with you."

Hannor exchanged a glance with Frayn and grunted his disbelief.

Frayn smiled to himself. "A Rationalist like yourself? I thought your kind disdained the flux and all it stands for?"

The man gestured. "I disdain the crass mysticism and lore surrounding the flux," he said. "I cannot dispute the fact that the flux itself works."

"Passage aboard my ship is expensive," Frayn snapped. "It would cost... 200 kay."

The man brandished a clip. "My money is good," he said, his reaction more that of a piqued child than a middle-aged man.

*And you are willing to pay well over the odds,* Frayn mused. He stared at the man. His suppressed air of desperation was unmistakable. Frayn judged that his casual bonhomie at the party had been no more than a façade.

Frayn wondered what the man might be running from.

"The price you pay is not only monetary," Frayn said.

"I understand. A day of dreamflux will age me six months."

Frayn nodded. The flux took a heavy physical toll on those less attuned than the fluxmaster and his crew.

"I am aware of the repercussions of riding in your biological machine," the man continued. "It is a price I am willing to pay."

Frayn stared at the man's thin, striated face. Everything about this deal made him suspicious. He should turn it down.

He took the man's clip and pressed it to his own, transferring the money. "Be at the 'port at dawn," he said. "We leave at six whether you're there or not."

The man bowed with mocking formality to Frayn, shot a glance of loathing towards Hannor, and quickly departed the patio.

Hannor's ruby eyes, during daylight hours retracted from the harsh light of the sun, now regarded Frayn with concern.

"I know," Frayn responded. "I too am loathe to trust him and yet something tells me this time me to ignore my instincts."

Hannor, as ever, was silent.

That night, secluded in his hotel room, Julius Frayn slid the dreamloop over his head and Sylvian's ghost was with him again.

In this dream, dredged from his subconscious by the 'loop, Frayn and his son were on Cynthera. Sylvian was twelve – the age he argued with Frayn and left home – and they were attending the Enjoining of Frayn's wife, Elisabetha.

Her comatose body was born aloft through the jungle by the elders of the clan. Frayn and Sylvian followed, like mourners at a funeral. Except, Frayn celebrated the fact of his wife's Enjoining, and its consequences.

Beside him, however, Sylvian was silent with disbelief.

The dream was merely a series of gaudy jungle images taken from his memory of the Enjoining, but the time before and after the ceremony had been difficult for Frayn.

Sylvian had refused to acknowledge the rightness of his mother's transition. He confronted Frayn in the longroom of the ancestral manse, while in a hal-lowed nether chamber clan surgeons prepared Elisabetha's body.

"You can't do this to me!" Sylvian wailed with all the indignity of his inexperienced twelve years. "You can't let Mother die!"

"Sylvian," Frayn said patiently. "How many times must I repeat: Elisabetha will not die. The Enjoining is a time of celebration, the beginning of a renewed and prolonged existence for your mother."

"But what *kind* of life will she lead in that... that *thing*?" Sylvian raged.

"Sylvian, it was ordained, long before your birth. Elisabetha was destined to fulfil her familial role as Caller of the Songlines, and I was to be the fluxmaster –"

Sylvian's hitherto pretty face became ugly. "So you're doing this for yourself!"

Frayn almost despaired. Twelve years ago the birth of his son had been a cause for celebration: he would have an heir who would continue his reign as fluxmaster. Not long after the birth, the clan surgeons broke the bad news: Sylvian was without the ability. He was a mundane, a normal.

Frayn knew that his relationship with the boy had suffered in consequence: how could he show the child the same affection as he would a boy who had inherited his ability with the flux?

Without the talent, Sylvian failed to appreciate the sacrifice of Elisabetha to the brood queen.

In the dream, Frayn experienced the enjoining. The pall-bearers reached the Calling chamber, the exoskeletal superstructure of the brood queen, and filed inside, their footsteps echoing in the osseous confines.

Elisabetha's body was lowered on its bier, placed with reverence in the hollowed cavity of the queen's cerebral nacelle. Frayn stepped forward: tradition dictated that he remove his wife's gown, the divestment symbolic of her renunciation of the physical realm.

He unfastened the silken bows with trembling fingers and parted the gown, revealing her stark and ivory nakedness to the eyes of the elders.

The surgeons had worked with their customary expertise: a hundred blood-red tubers emerged from the pale flesh of the Caller of the Songlines.

Frayn felt an overwhelming emotion well within him: gratitude and love. The elders began an echoing plainsong.

Then, from the porous bone of the Queen's cerebral nacelle, tentacles emerged squirming and found their blind way towards the sacrificial body.

One by one they clamped onto the tubers, and Elisabetha spasmed in ecstasy.

Seconds later Frayn was aware of her glorious ascent, her departure from this banal realm of the

flesh. She enjoined with the quiddity of the universe and called the Songlines.

And within his mind, almost bringing him to his knees in an exquisite climax of rapture, Frayn heard her Calling.

He was only distantly aware of his son's scream as Sylvian turned and ran from the hallowed chamber.

Frayn worked hard to win back the affection of his son during the course of the next month. But Sylvian would not be mollified. Frayn experienced guilt that he had failed to communicate the sublimity of Elisabetha's experience to his confused son: he wondered how much he secretly resented Sylvian for being unable to continue his proud and talented lineage.

His guilt became a painful brand when, one month after Elisabetha's Enjoining, Sylvian departed the ancestral manse forever, leaving a note explaining that he was working passage aboard a slow-ship bound for Earth. That Sylvian had chosen to flee like that was bad enough; even worse was the thought of the conditions he might have to endure aboard the ship.

A week later Frayn became master of his first fluxship and flew the Songlines to humanity's homeplanet. For the past five long years he had spent much of his time and effort in trying to find his son.

The ship was as magnificent as ever.

A sleek jet dewdrop the size of a small building, the fluxship rested on a double row of stubby, vestigial legs. The first light of dawn glanced off the arched, chitinous carapace, and Frayn felt the need to be once again coursing the Songlines.

A troupe of hyperactive synth-macaques swarmed over the *Oh Carrollian*, scrubbing at the portholes and the multifaceted, horseshoe-shaped array of eyes wrapped around the ship's bulbous headpiece.

Hannor was calling the macaques to extra effort, urging industry with his calm baritone. Frayn clapped a hand on the alien's angular shoulders. He breathed the Cyntheran's rubbery scent. "All ready?"

Hannor dipped his hooded head. He drew back the cowl that protected his scales from the dry air. His blunt, reptilian face regarded Frayn. Tight slits showed that the Cyntheran had retracted his sensitive eyes for further protection. Blind, yet all seeing.

"The flux is strong, Brother Frayn. The Songlines call to me."

Frayn touched his Second on the back. "We'll go soon," he said. "I'll get Harque."

He sensed the quick thrill rushing through the alien's mind. Millennia ago, Hannor's ancestors had ridden the flux creatures through the steaming jungles of Cynthera, linked mind to mind. Over the centuries the ability had been lost to the majority of natives; only occasionally did a sport show the talent. Hannor was one such, and Frayn was privileged to have him as his second.

The sun was rising with a visual fanfare of cerise and tangerine banners when Frayn passed a rope through the ring in Harque's nose and led him from the stable.

The great Thaptor shambled into the daylight, his slow progress watched with amazement by a crowd of beggars and street-urchins.

They had evidently never seen such a beast before, perhaps not even imagined that one could exist: vaguely hippo-like, but distorted, etiolated, his pale flesh imprinted with serried rows of grooves from long confinement in the fluxship's braincase.

Harque trudged along with bad grace at being woken so early and muttered complaints in his monosyllabic language. He halted defiantly to fart and stolidly evacuate prodigious cobs of steaming vegetable matter, and only then deigned to resume his laborious progress across the cobbles of the 'port.

Frayn was aware of a curious unease in the beast's manner. He tried asking Harque what troubled him, but the Thaptor's understanding was so rudimentary, his ability to communicate so limited, that his only reply was: "Tired. Uncomfortable. Don't like [unintelligible]. Want sleep."

Frayn led the Thaptor up the loading ramp into the *Oh Carrollian*. The fluxship's cavernous abdominal cavity was packed tight with cargo, leaving only a tortuous passage through to the braincase. Unlike the lavishly decorated passenger quarters, this far forward the ship was bare and functional, the surfaces polished through use with a lustre like obsidian.

Hannor waited by the narrow entry to the braincase. Between them, they eased and chivvied the reluctant Harque into his osseous confinement.

Here in the cool interior, Hannor was unhooded and Frayn could see his worried expression. When the alien's newly exposed pale eyes turned to him, a sudden burst of empathy confirmed his Second's concern.

For the smooth passage of the ship across the flux, it was necessary that Master, Second and Thaptor shared harmonious cerebral communications. Any disturbance endangered the entire ship.

He left Hannor settling the Thaptor and went down to supervise the unshackling of the fluxship from its moorings.

As he stepped from the ramp into the ruby light of dawn, he made out the slim figure of their passenger. Again, Frayn had to stifle his unease. It was business, that was all. In a day he would be rid of this wealthy fugitive and whatever threat his presence might present.

"You are just in time," Frayn said. "We were about to embark without you, Mr...?"

The man nodded. He wore a light suit this morning, in deference to the dawn's chill. He looked almost sombre. "Di Stefano," he said. "Gianluca di Stefano. So you meant it when you said you would leave without me."

Frayn gestured towards the ramp. "Please," he said. "I'll show you to your cabin."

As befitted the fluxship's status as transport for the ultra-rich, di Stefano's cabin in the thoracic subchamber was lined with fine carpets and tapestries, the exposed chitinous fretwork of the domed ceiling picked out in gold leaf. The effect was baroque and, to



Frayn's more pragmatic tastes, quite obscene.

He indicated a tasselled cord. "Pull it if you require anything," he said, "or if you wish to move about the ship during the journey – someone will come and attend to you. The subjective duration of the flight will be only two hours, although objectively our journey is almost instantaneous." He smiled. "That is why you are paying so much, after all."

Frayn climbed the spiral staircase to the nacelle behind the ship's horseshoe array of eyes. Hannor was already there: lost to the physical, absorbed by the flux. Frayn could sense the wash of his near-religious ecstasy.

Strictly speaking, the giant synth that was the flux-ship was mostly dead. It had been engineered so that only a tiny part of its brain – that part which accessed the ur-reality of the flux – still functioned. The Thaptor, locked into the confines of the ship's braincase, acted as an amplifier; the combined efforts of Master and Second controlled the raw channelling of ship and beast, allowing the vessel to navigate the Songlines broadcast by the Caller on Cynthera – Elisabetha.

To adapt an old truism: any level of evolution sufficiently advanced from our own is indistinguishable from the supernatural. The flux-creatures were so mentally attuned to the fabric of the universe that they could haul themselves along the Songlines called through time and space in a way which defied the laws of physics as they were understood.

Humans capable of mastering the flux, as Frayn and Elisabetha had learned to do, were rare. More technological approaches had been adopted on those planets which had opposed the use of living fluxships, including Earth. Generally, they were less effective and the biological toll on travellers was greater – there was nothing to match a living fluxship.

Taking a deep, calming breath, Frayn lowered himself into a padded recliner that looked as if it had grown out of the chitinous floor of the command nacelle. Immediately, a trumpet-like hood descended, moulded itself to his face.

He could *see* now. He could sense Elisabetha, calling to him.

Where before the facets of the ship's eyes had been dull, blank, now they were clear, pulsing with a tangled skein of light.

The flux was alive and so too, at last, was Flux-master Julius Frayn.

Hannor was beside him, around him, as was Harque – the beast's thought patterns resonant and harmonic, where before they had been dull and wary.

Where before they had been three species and a synth artefact, now they were one.

Frayn reached out with his mind, connected with Elisabetha's rapturous Songline, and the *Oh Carrollian* plunged – *outward, onward*. To be connected to his wife in this way was an ecstasy beyond that which either had known when united physically in the past. Instinctively, Frayn and Hannor guided the ship along the Songline amplified by the mind of

Harque the Thaptor.

Back in the real world, Frayn knew that the ship's outline had wavered and then vanished; instantly it would materialize seven and a half thousand kilometres away in eastern China. Yet – by the perverse mathematics of fluxtime – they must pass two hours in the suspended reality of the dreamflux, riding the Songline through time and space.

And the body of their passenger would age by about six months, as a consequence of the biological stress of the journey.

(Somewhere, deep down in his mind, Frayn was aware of something different... an irregularity... a flaw in the dreamflux.)

He concentrated on the startling crystalline purity of his wife's Songline – and yet was suddenly aware of strange visions darting at him from the surrounding darkness.

(Faces... faces floating in his peripheral vision. No: it was a single face. *Sylvian's* face. His son.)

From whose mind did these images originate? In the dreamflux it was hard to distinguish.

Not Harque, clearly – the beast was incapable of such a feat. And not Elisabetha, consumed as she was in the devotion of her Calling. Hannor, too, was absorbed in the ecstasy of the flux.

His own mind, then? Some strange twist in his psyche of which he was unaware?

His speculations were interrupted.

—Master— it was Hannor, communicating through the flux. —Look into Harque's mind. He is troubled, disturbed. What is happening?—

With huge effort, Frayn focused on the mental patterns of the Thaptor. Harque was struggling with the flux, as always, but there was something else, some added element that was disturbing the beast.

—Don't like— Harque was thinking. —Don't like. Di Stefano. Angers me.—

Concerned, Frayn tried to smooth over the Thaptor's anxiety, smothering the beast with his reassuring thought patterns. His effort took effect – the wild surges of dreamflux ebbed, stabilizing.

Eventually, Frayn pulled back and concentrated on working with Hannor to ease the passage of the *Oh Carrollian* along the songline called like rapture through the flux.

He sensed that the journey was about half-completed when he finally realized that Harque was pacified; this was now a flight like any other.

Tentatively he withdrew, feeling himself relax as he floated free of his body, now fully immersed in the dreamflux. When he was sure that everything was well, he floated across the nacelle and drifted down the spiral staircase, heading for the passenger quarters.

Di Stefano's body lay slumped across the antique bed, while his dreamflux self hung by a port, staring out at the twisting channels of light. He turned when Frayn appeared in the open doorway. His body language was strange: an odd mix of hesitancy and the arrogance Frayn had first seen in him.

"What do you want?" Frayn asked.

The man nodded: there was no pretence now. "It is what you might want that is the issue," he said.

Frayn stared at him, waited until he continued.

"You have family?" the man asked.

Frayn hesitated, then nodded. "A son," he said. "He will be 17, now."

"We have your son, Master Frayn. We can return him to you."

After so long! Five years on this confounded planet, following hopeless leads, baseless rumours, in hope that he might one day locate his son.

"There must be a price, Mr di Stefano?"

The man nodded. "Your ship," he said softly. "Let us destroy your fluxship and the boy is yours."

"You work for one of the shipping lines?" Frayn said. The lines whose technological alternatives to fluxships had proved uncompetitive against the real thing, tailored by evolution and refined by genetic re-engineering.

Di Stefano nodded. "They pay me, yes," he said. "There is a temporary port set up in Henan province – I have the co-ordinates. You will land there and hand over the fluxship, and your son will be returned to you."

Frayn thought of Hannor, so possessive of the flux, so addicted to the ur-real dimension. How might his alien friend live without the soothing contact with the songlines? And Harque, who only really knew true life when working in the flux...

"And if we refuse?" Frayn asked. "What will your employers do when we hand you over to the police at Shanghai?"

Di Stefano shrugged. The man's casual arrogance irritated Frayn. "We own the Shanghai police," he said. "Your son will be killed, of course. He will suffer. Do you have a conscience, Master Frayn?"

Frayn stared past di Stefano at the lights of the dreamflux shot through the outer darkness. The *Oh Carrollian* was priceless beyond the value of any child. He could not let the ship be destroyed. Hannor and Harque did not deserve to lose that which made their lives worthwhile.

He was aware of di Stefano's arrogant gaze. "Well, Master Frayn? Your answer?"

"I must consult my crew," he answered shortly. He left di Stefano and drifted through the ship. He moved up the spiral staircase to the command nacelle. He saw his own body and that of Hannor, side by side on their recliners, limbs twitching in unison as they worked to steer the *Oh Carrollian* through the flux.

He re-entered his body, joined the flux once again, and informed Hannor and Harque of their passenger's ultimatum.

Together, Master Frayn and Second Hannor guided the snorting, eructating bulk of the Thaptor down the ramp into the dazzling midday sun.

The temporary landing site in Henan province was a football stadium, the groundcrew armed heavily with charge rifles and shields.

Frayn scanned the watching crowd for Sylvian. Seven-

teen years old, the boy would probably be tall if he took after his mother and father. He would be visible, here.

No sign.

Frayn turned to di Stefano.

The passenger dipped his head and said, "You have fulfilled your part of the deal, Master Frayn. You will find Sylvian by Gate H."

Frayn's eyes followed the direction of di Stefano's gesture.

He turned to Hannor, apologetic, defensive. The alien wore a deep cowl to shield him from the sun, his eyes retracted, but Frayn knew that his friend was distraught at their impending loss – an addict soon to be deprived of the source of his fix.

How long would it be before he and his crew were granted another fluxship from the Guild of Masters on Cynthera? Only one was re-engineered every couple of years, and there was a waiting list of crews for these.

"Go," said the alien, softly. "He is your son, Brother Frayn. It... it is right."

He was running.

He couldn't help himself: running to find the son he had lost. The son he had failed, for being unable to explain the true significance of the dreamflux.

Rounding the towering bulk of the grandstand, he saw Gate H and then stopped. By the gate was a box – too small to be the coffin he had at first feared.

He hurried towards the box and dropped to his knees in bewilderment.

Resting on the box was a dreamloop. He reached out, picked it up with trembling fingers, and dropped it over his head.

He was no longer in the stadium in Henan province. He was once again on Cynthera, in one of the many cavernous timber rooms of his ancestral manse.

A figure stood beside a high window, limned in blinding sunlight and, in silhouette, unrecognizable.

"Father," said a small voice, and its owner moved from before the window.

Sylvian – as he had been five years ago, aged twelve, a fey slight boy with frightened eyes. "I'm sorry, father. It's hard to explain."

"Sylvian," Frayn heard himself saying. "I don't understand. Where are you? What is all this...?"

The boy's large frightened eyes looked up, into his. "When mother was... when she was Enjoined – I couldn't stay on Cynthera, father. It was... I thought it was evil, what you did to her –"

"It was her choice, Sylvian. It was what she wanted. She is more truly happy now than she ever was."

The boy winced, as if wounded. "I needed her. She should have been there for me."

"I was there for you, after the Enjoining."

The boy was shaking his head. As Frayn watched, his features began to change, to age. "You were no substitute, father. I'm sorry. You didn't understand. All you could talk about was the dreamflux, and your ability." Something hardened in the rapidly maturing features. "How do you think I felt, having no ability? How do you think it made me feel, having my inade-

quacy made plain by you all day, every day?"

"Sylvian... I tried to do my best."

The boy almost spat. "Your best! Then your best was hardly good enough."

"I came for you – for five years I've been searching."

"I made sure you couldn't find me..."

He was ageing still, as a human ages in the flux: but accelerated, exaggerated.

"I have seen a lot over the past five years, father. I have done a lot, too. And learnt." His voice was deeper now, oddly familiar.

Frayn stared at Sylvian: he had aged way beyond the 17 that he now must be. What was happening, Frayn wondered? Was this some cruel joke that his blackmailers were playing?

"And I travelled, too," Sylvian went on. "The flux-ship-derived constructs take a greater biological toll, especially if one does not possess the ability. I didn't inherit your attunement to the flux. I'm old, now, far beyond my years..."

Frayn stared into the ageing face. It became even thinner, and Sylvian's body lengthened, grew emaciated, covered with the cruel tattoos of the Rationalist cadre.

Frayn stared in horror at the face of Gianluca di Stefano.

"I'm sorry, father – but I don't regret my actions. I did what I believe is right. I hope you can forgive me."

Frayn tore the dreamloop from his head and turned.

Di Stefano – or Sylvian, rather – stood before him. There was no arrogance in the man's eyes, now. Frayn saw only the pain of his betrayal – and he experienced a surge of rage at the actions of his son, and beyond rage the souring sensation of guilt.

In the distance, Frayn saw a bright flash, and a fountain of osseous shrapnel fly high into the air. He felt the pain of the ship as it expired, and he told himself that he could sense, also, Elisabetha's grief.

Hannor and Harque approached and paused behind di Stefano. The tableau seemed to be waiting, waiting for his decision.

Hannor said: "Master, we must make arrangements to return to Cynthera."

Frayn nodded. "I will be with you presently," he said.

As Hannor and the Thaptor walked past him through the gate, Frayn looked into the aged eyes of his son.

"Come," he said, holding out a hand. "We have much to talk about, Sylvian."

Slowly, divided by mutual ignorance and misunderstanding, but united by much more, father and son walked side by side through the gate and into the teeming city.

**Keith Brooke** (born 1966) and **Eric Brown** (born 1960) are both *Interzone* regulars, separately and together. They converse with each other in the interview which precedes the above story.

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# Molly & the Angel

*Francis Amery*

The first time Molly saw the angel he was standing in the middle of the pedestrianized precinct at the end of the High Street. There was no mistaking what he was. He had wings like a great white eagle, whose pinion feathers were touching the ground although the tops of their great furled arches extended a foot and a half above the circle of light that rimmed his head. It wasn't a comedy halo like a battery-powered quoit but a solid disc half as bright as the winter sun. He was dressed in a dazzling-white robe that hung loose from his broad shoulders to his sandalled feet. He looked slightly puzzled, but only in an intellectual sort of way – more curious than alarmed and not in the least discomposd.

No one was paying any attention to him, even though the last of the lingering January sales had finished the Saturday before last and no one had anything more pressing to do than was normal for a Tuesday morning. The shoppers and the truanting kids saw him all right, but they wouldn't look directly at him and made detours to avoid passing within arms' reach of him. He couldn't have alienated so much attention if he'd been carrying a clipboard, a blue pencil and a sheaf of questions about sanitary protection.

Molly almost paused – but during the little margin of hesitation which might have realized the *almost* she lost heart and quickened her step, just like everybody else.

Later, she told herself that she'd had to do it. After that thing with Elvis, she couldn't afford to get involved with an angel. She'd kept the affair with Elvis secret, of course; if she'd told anyone it would have got back to the social services. Not that she'd have been sectioned again – you practically had to kill someone to get sectioned these days – but it would have come up when the next group meeting considered the possibility of giving the kids back. The only thing likely to have a worse effect on the average group meeting than the news that the client had had a fling with Elvis – even one that had never got as far as actual penetration – was the news that the client had been visited by an angel. The entire audi-

ence for *Touched by an Angel* was probably made up of social workers, who presumably figured the show as the ultimate wet dream but couldn't believe a word of it. It was very popular in the States, they said, but so was Elvis; neither played quite as well in Putney, even on what the local Estate Agents had started calling the "Wandsworth borders."

Even so, she regretted it. She was still slightly regretful about ending it with Elvis. How many women were there in the world, after all, who'd knocked back Elvis for the sake of her kids? And how many of them had subsequently seen an angel? Thousands of people must have walked past the angel, even on a Tuesday morning in February, but none of the ones who'd seen Elvis while he was living in the neighbourhood had got as close to him as Molly, and most of them hadn't even *almost* stopped when they saw the angel.

Maybe that was the way it always was, she thought, philosophically. Maybe nobody ever stopped except the person the angel had come to see. There was a certain propriety in that – and if angels couldn't maintain propriety in this godforsaken world, who could?

The second time Molly saw the angel he was standing outside the old Salvation Army Temple. There was a split second when she didn't quite recognize him, but the face was unmistakable even though everything else about him had changed. His wings were only half the size now, and patterned like a pigeon's. The nimbus was gone, although his hair was still luxuriant and golden blond. The white robe was gone too, unless its trailing hem had been tucked up above the knee so that it could remain hidden within the tan-coloured raincoat he was wearing – which seemed unlikely, given that the bottoms of a pair of grey flannel trousers were clearly visible, their turn-ups resting on brown suede loafers. He still seemed a trifle bewildered, and discomposure was beginning to creep up on him now.

The benches where the down-and-outs hung out were crowded, but none of the alkies were looking at the angel. They couldn't have treated him with more

disdain if he'd been a Tory councillor down from Westminster on a fact-finding tour.

Molly had thought for some months after it closed that the alkies kept returning to the Temple out of habit and sentiment, but it had turned out that it was just round the corner from the lock-up where the local white-van man stored the bottles and cans he shipped in from Eastenders three times a week. It was the cheapest source of strong cider for miles around. The white-van man was called Lucas but the alkies called him Saint Luke because he allowed them to buy at wholesale prices without a trade card. The local crackheads looked upon the alkies with naked envy, knowing full well that their prices went up as their dependency increased – but their supplier insisted on being known as Saint John anyway, just for form's sake.

Again, Molly almost stopped – this time in spite of the fact that the angel was hanging about in a place where she usually quickened her paces in order to minimize the deluge of cackling abuse. Again, she couldn't quite bring herself to interrupt her stride.

The down-and-outs weren't in the least bothered by the fact that the angel could overhear them; they made all the usual remarks. They knew where Molly lived, and in their estimation – which was not unrepresentative of the world's – that automatically made her a whore whose current hundred-per-cent dependency on the social was probably symptomatic of the fact that she was too ugly to get the kerb-crawlers to stop. That was what they called out, anyhow, although an alky would have to have very few memory cells left to be oblivious to the fact that kerb-crawlers would stop for anything in a skirt and heels with a hole at the right height.

Molly never rose to the bait, as some of the other women at the B&B were wont to do, but on this particular occasion she couldn't suppress a blush. It was not on her own behalf that she suffered embarrassment but on behalf of the angel. It wasn't much of an advertisement for humankind that the Sally Ann had had to close its Temple, or that all the street scum in the neighbourhood gathered there to take what advantage they could of their friendly neighbourhood smuggler, or that the very same street scum were prepared to pretend that the only thing stopping her from pulling down her knickers for them was that they had better things to do with their money.

Given that the Millennium was only ten months away – which Molly, being a reader, knew perfectly well, in spite of the fact that 90 per cent of the population had already celebrated it at the end of 1999 – she would have thought that even the down-and-outs would have wanted to put on a *bit* of a front while the eyes of Heaven were upon them, but no. The alkies had long since given up on propriety – and, she supposed, everything else.

The third time Molly saw the angel he was sitting at a two-seater table crammed into an alcove in the public library. He was reading the *Independent*. Of his wings

there was now not the slightest trace, and his rain-coat, although it couldn't have been cheap – if, in fact, he'd purchased it instead of miraculously spinning it out of some mysterious utility fog – was stained, as if he'd been sleeping rough. His hair was mousy brown, just beginning to thin at the back. In spite of all this, however, there was no hesitation in her recognition. She'd seen him twice already, and she hadn't forgotten the finely-sculpted lines of his face. Three days' worth of stubble couldn't hide the fact that he was the most beautiful man presently in the world.

Molly looked away as soon as she saw him, but she'd already taken note of the fact that the only empty seat left on the entire ground floor was the one opposite the angel, and she knew before she went up the stairs to REFERENCE that there wouldn't be any room up there because of all the kids from the college filling in their free periods. When she got to REFERENCE she went over to the encyclopedias. She hesitated over the *Britannica* and the *Catholic Encyclopedia*, but in the end she took the *Encyclopedia of Fantasy* off the shelf. It seemed, on the whole, to be the most sensible place to look up ANGELS.

She read through the article, committed a handful of names to memory, and then went back down to the card catalogue to check whether the books were in the lending stock. She always used the card catalogue instead of the computer because it felt nicer. She'd hoped they might at least have *The Revolt of the Angels* or *The Wonderful Visit*, but they didn't. Out of print, out of mind. What they did have back in REFERENCE, however, was a two-volume edition of Old Testament Apocrypha and Pseudoepigraphia, so she went upstairs again and hauled out the unwieldy volume containing the *Book of Enoch*. Then she took it downstairs, planted it on the table at which the angel was sitting, and plonked herself with almost-equal emphasis in the vacant chair.

It never occurred to her to wonder whether the angel might be reading the *Independent* as a matter of choice. She'd spent enough time taking advantage of the free central heating to know that no one came into the library because they were desperate to find out what was happening in the world. The ones who were so desperate to get in that they would be queuing up at opening time always grabbed the *Sun*, the *Mirror* and the *Mail* first, then the *Express* and the *Guardian*. Then the ones who were pretending hardest that they were really earning their Jobseeker's Allowance would grab the *Times*, the *Telegraph* and the local rag. The *Independent* was always the last to go, left for the attention of the poor sucker who had no choices left.

Molly had opened the book and read the first four pages of *Enoch*, including the footnotes, before the angel lowered the *Independent* sufficiently to let his eyes peep over. She waited a full three seconds before raising her own head so that she could meet his curious but mildly suspicious gaze. The angel's eyes were the bluest she had ever seen. They were bluer than the bluest sky on the brightest summer day there had ever been. They were the only thing left which

would have immediately informed the most casual observer, seeing him for the first time, that their owner was, in fact, an angel.

To show off her erudition, Molly had already prepared an apposite quote. She wasn't entirely sure which James Bond book it came from, but thought it was probably *Goldfinger*. "Once is happenstance," she said. "Twice is coincidence. Three times is... are you looking for me, by any chance?"

"No," said the angel, too bluntly to allow her to savour the music of his voice.

"Oh," said Molly, wondering whether she ought to be relieved or hurt. "Well, if you'd care to tell me who you are looking for, maybe I can help. You don't seem to be having much success on your own."

"I'm not looking for anyone," the angel said. He didn't seem particularly well-spoken.

"No message to deliver?" Molly queried. "No mission to carry out?"

"No," said the angel.

"You're just not playing the game, are you?" Molly said. "What's the matter – don't you have TV in Heaven?"

The angel lowered the *Independent* and displayed the entirety of his incredibly beautiful but unshaven face. He seemed to be trying to formulate a question. Molly guessed that she was the first human being he'd talked to, and figured that she ought to help him out.

"Well," she said, "if you haven't come to deliver a message, and you aren't here to befriend and redirect some poor unfortunate who's on the brink of making a morally disastrous decision, what are you doing way down here?"

The angel didn't even blink. "I fell," he said.

It wasn't what he said that bowled Molly over but the way he said it. She'd spoken lightly, as if the whole thing were a joke, not because she thought it was but because that was the only way she knew of dealing with a situation she'd never encountered before. He could have said exactly the same words in that sort of way and it would have been funny. It *could* have been pure stand-up, the kind of thing that got Eddie Izzard a big laugh – but it wasn't. It was deadly serious. And even though Molly was sitting there with the *Book of Enoch* open on the desk, its pages well-nigh tabloid-size, it didn't even occur to her to connect "I fell" with the war in Heaven or Paradise Lost or the angels which had begat the Nephilim on the lucky daughters of men. She had heard "I fell" spoken in exactly that manner, in exactly that tone, by neighbours in the bedsit, by companions in group and by fellow shelf-stackers on the very few occasions when the temp agency managed to get her work in spite of her record, her history, her lack of a proper address and her general Oxfam-dressed appearance. Oddly enough, though, she couldn't quite remember whether she'd ever said it herself.

She'd certainly sported the bruises more than once in the hectic days when she'd copped for the kids, so she knew it wasn't a lie. It never was a lie, although everyone always thought it was. Even when you got a

push in the back, or a fist in your face, it wasn't a lie. The fact that an angel could say it certainly proved that, even if it proved nothing else.

A few more minutes passed before Molly recovered herself sufficiently to say: "When you say *fell*, you do mean from Heaven, I suppose – not from the Land of Dreams, or any cop-out along those lines."

"From Heaven," the angel confirmed. Nobody with eyes like those could be capable of copping out, any more than he could be capable of copping for a couple of kids.

Molly took the angel round the corner to The Greasy Spoon, whose proprietor hadn't quite got to grips with the concept of irony when he'd changed its name from The Bistro. She offered to buy the angel something to eat, but he told her that he didn't need food *as such*. She ordered the all-day breakfast and a pot of tea for two.

"I shouldn't really have to do this," she explained to him, figuring that he had to be pretty innocent in the ways of the world if he'd had to make do with the *Independent* since his arrival. "Being in a B&B, I ought to get breakfast *included*. That's what the second B stands for, after all – but standards have slipped down here. On the other hand, it's better than a lot of places. The girls on the game are very good about only doing it in alleyways and cars, for the sake of the kids, and we've all got our own sinks and electric kettles, and the loos aren't that bad, considering, and the TV in the sitting room is always replaced the day after it gets nicked. I'm in the smallest room, of course, but you could say that I'm in the lap of luxury compared to most, because my kids are still out to foster. Unfortunately, just about the last way you can score any points when you get that close to the bottom is to get your kids back, so I'm actually reckoned to be not yet off the mark, even though I've kicked everything but the Prozac and the over-the-counter tranks disguised as anti-histamines. Some would say that my brain chemistry is fried anyhow, but I don't think so – and at least I've got guts, to say that to an angel. I have the breakfast at lunchtime because it's cheaper than anything actually called *lunch* and if you only have one real meal a day it's better to have it in the middle. Can't cook in the rooms, you see, except for cup-a-soup and other just-add-boiling-water crap, and who can stomach that? What's Heaven like, exactly?"

"It's not *like* anything," the angel said, unhelpfully.

"Nice gardens? Pleasant weather? Bright light?" Molly prompted, figuring that any hint at all would be better than nothing, and that she really ought to try to bring the angel out of himself a little. If he hadn't been sent to deliver a message, the fact that he had accepted the lunch invitation, even though he didn't need food *as such*, suggested that maybe he had been sent as some kind of test.

"None of that," he said.

"None of it! What about singing? Surely you were in the choir. Doesn't it get boring, just bathing in the presence of God, century after century?"

"No," he said. "There's no time in Heaven."

"No *time*?" Molly hadn't been expecting that. "What keeps everything from happening at once then?"

"Nothing," he informed her, calmly. "Everything does happen at once." He sipped his tea but it was still too hot, and probably too sharp for his celestially-softened palate.

"You'd better put some sugar in it," Molly said, passing him the thing that looked like a giant salt-cellar with a chimney. "That's a bit rotten, don't you think? The preachers promise eternity. Don't you think the dead might be a little disappointed when they get there and find that their stay is considerably shorter than a split nanosecond? If Saatchi and Saatchi tried that the Advertising Standards Authority would be down on them like a ton of bricks."

"It's not *shorter* than anything," the angel said. "You have to set aside that whole way of thinking. Paradise isn't a *place* at all. The human imagination is too narrowly attuned to mere existence to encompass its essence."

Molly couldn't help but wonder whether she'd first caught sight of him just too late to see the clipboard and blue pencil disappear.

"So what did you *do*?" she said.

"We don't *do* anything," he began – but she immediately saw that he'd got hold of the wrong end of the stick.

"I said *did*, not *do*," she said. "I've given up fishing for descriptions. I mean, what did *you* do to qualify for the drop? With Lucifer it was pride, with the fathers of the Nephilim it was presumably lust. That still leaves five deadly sins untapped by angelkind. *Please* don't tell me it was sloth."

The angel made a face. He'd obviously put too much sugar in the tea. "I fell," he repeated, in the same stubbornly heart-melting fashion. It wasn't a lie. Whatever he was covering up, whoever he was protecting, it wasn't a lie.

Molly sighed, but she didn't have the heart to be sarcastic. "So what are the other fallen angels doing these days?" she asked. She was genuinely interested. "According to Enoch, they taught mankind the fundamentals of technology and civilization, but the skills they passed on must have become obsolete ages ago. Unless, of course, they got more out of government retraining schemes than I ever did."

"I don't know," he said.

"But you're hoping to make contact, right? Or maybe not. I mean, if the fallen angels are all in Hell, you'd probably rather stay here. Always assuming, of course, that this isn't hell and that I *am* out of it. That's Mephistopheles, you know." She felt slightly ashamed of showing off, especially as she'd only seen the *Dr Faustus* movie with Richard Burton, way back in the days when she'd had the falling habit herself. At least she'd always had her own TV in those days; the only way to keep a TV was to have a bloke around who could nick someone else's when your own got burgled. Sometimes, she wondered whether there were any real victims any more, or whether there was just

a vast population of knocked-off TVs that were kept constantly in circulation by the beating heart of larcenous intent. The ones that kept reappearing in the sitting room certainly hadn't come from Comet.

"I don't know anything about Hell," the angel said stuffily, "but I know this isn't it."

"If you're not going to drink that tea," Molly said, "you might as well give it here. So what, exactly, are your plans?"

He didn't answer that, presumably because he had no answer to give, and he didn't give her the tea. He forced himself to drink. After two or three further sips he seemed to get used to the sweetness, but the colour of his eyes was like a sky looking down on someplace as far away as Molly could imagine, and she was not an unimaginative person.

"Well," she said, even though she knew it would make her sound like a social worker, "if it's nectar you want, you'll have to get up again, won't you? It's the only way to get over the falling habit – believe me, I know. Stick around here, and it isn't just the tea that will go from bad to worse. It won't be just a matter of losing the wings and your raincoat turning into something a flasher would be ashamed to open up."

The angel still didn't reply. He was now so deeply absorbed in the tea that he was at risk of becoming obsessed, and Molly began to wonder whether it had really been a kindness to tell him to sweeten it. Fortunately, she was spared the temptation to offer him a sausage or a bit of fried bread. She'd been hungry. Conversation always gave her an appetite – *real* conversation, that is, not the kind of chatting that the women in the B&B went in for.

"Of course," she said, figuring that if she were going to come on like a social worker she might as well go the whole hog, "you have to *want* to get up again. Nobody can help you if you won't be helped. Maybe you'd be happier down here on Earth. There's not much to recommend it, I suppose, but we do have time – all the time in the world. Places too, though rumour has it they're not as various as they used to be. Look, you're not exactly making this easy for me, are you? I mean, I'm trying to do you a *good turn* here. Who knows – this may be my last chance to qualify for Heaven? You could at least pretend that you're interested. Think of it as an episode of *Touched by a Human*. I can only do so much – at the end of the day, it's up to you."

"Yes," he said, betraying a hint of positivity for the first time. "I can see that. But it's hard for me too."

The tone of his voice melted her heart all over again. The words *I fell* echoed in her mind, and echoed and echoed.

"It's okay," she said. "If you guys really did teach us the fundamentals of technology and civilization, we owe you one. Like they say in America, if you can't pay back, pay forward. Between the two of us, we'll get it figured out. You lucked out – hardly anyone around here spends more time in the library than me, and I don't just *pretend* to read. But you can't stay the night at the B&B. It's the rules, and I can't afford to get chucked out. I could get the kids back any day



now, and then, who knows?" She was telling the truth about not pretending to read. She loved the *Penguin Dictionary of Quotations*, where Oscar Wilde had observed that it was better to be beautiful than good, but better to be good than ugly. If the beautiful angel wasn't going to cuddle her, she could at least pretend that it was her decision, her choice, her ruling.

"I know," he said, although it wasn't at all clear what he knew – or was prepared to pretend that he knew, given that he probably didn't know anything at all about anything outside of a Heaven which wasn't a place and didn't even have time.

The alkies didn't say a word when Molly and the angel walked past the old Salvation Army Temple, but that was probably because the cider had taken the edge off their wit. There was no sign of Saint Luke or his boozemobile but the down-and-outs had obviously experienced a visitation. They weren't as blissful as crackheads blessed by Saint John, but they weren't as mean as they were when they had hangovers.

There were five pre-schoolers playing on the stairs at the B&B, and a couple of the mums popped their heads out to make sure that the visitor wasn't an obvious child-molester, but neither passed any comment on the unlikelihood of Molly keeping company with an angel. They just stared, with eyes the colour of dirty dishwater – eyes incapable of reflecting anything but the dullest winter sky.

The angel was appropriately impressed by the tidiness of her room, although it represented a very modest victory over the forces of chaos. She'd moved the wardrobe to cover up the corner where the mould kept growing on the wall, and she'd put the rug she'd salvaged from a skip over the shiny grease-patch on the carpet. The bed was made and there wasn't a single item of clothing draped over the back of the chair. Only the curtains were seriously disgusting, and she couldn't be expected to take *them* to the launderette. The angel didn't even glance at the curtains; a true representative of the Good, he let his eyes wander over the piles of books stacked – *almost* neatly – under the window, at the foot of the bed and all around the sink.

"Burglars never pinch books," she told him. "No point. And before you ask, I haven't read them all. I picked most of them up going through the boxes people leave at the side when the recycling bin gets too full, and I always figure it's better to take the ones that you might never get around to reading than leave anything you might regret not having picked up when you run out of ones you're actually keen on. Anyway, big thick paperbacks make bloody good draught-excluders."

The angel turned to look at her, more appraisingly than before. Molly was alarmed to note that the summer sky had already begun to fade from his eyes. At what point, she wondered, would he pass the point of no return? And what would happen to him then? Would he have to fight just to hang on to human status? *Could* he hang on to human status, if that became his fallback position, or would he just keep on sliding, all the way to Lucifer and Hell?

"I suppose you've tried praying?" she said.

"Yes." He sat down on the bed, and Molly had to resist the temptation to join him. Now that he'd taken his raincoat off, his relatively unspoiled suit made him look way too good for this kind of environment, and she couldn't bear the prospect of seeing him flinch and move away if her cellulite should accidentally come into contact with his thigh.

"I think I tried it myself once," she said. "Way back when. It didn't do any good, even though I was still a virgin and didn't understand the chorus of *Ebenezer Good*. Maybe I couldn't take it seriously enough – but lack of faith is one problem *you* shouldn't have. I suppose there's no point in asking what God's like. He's not *like* anything, is he? He just *is*."

"That's right," said the angel.

"Thought so. You haven't a fucking clue, have you? Down here, you're completely out of your fucking depth."

Because she was looking him right in the eye she saw the colour weaken each time she pronounced the obscenity, and was stricken by the terrible thought that if this *was* a test, she must now be more than half way to failing. She suddenly realized how urgent the problem, was, and how much time she'd already wasted. This was Earth, after all, and time was of the essence.

At that revelatory moment, Molly would have given anything in the world for the answer to the angel's problem to be easy. Love would have been so easy, but she already knew that it wasn't even worth a try. She knew beyond the shadow of a doubt that if she could only get the angel to take the least little bit of pleasure in her, she could do it with love and not just with lust, but she also knew far better than he did – with luck, far better than he ever would – where the limitations of reality lay.

"Well," she said, slightly startled by the desperation in her voice, "there are a few more things that aren't even worth trying. I think we can take it for granted that Prozac isn't the answer in this particular case, and Freudian analysis wouldn't get us anywhere even if we had the time. We need a fix that's quick, but one that isn't chemical." She nearly added *and doesn't involve fucking* but she caught herself in time. She didn't want to labour the point, and was hesitant about deepening the blue of his eyes any further than it was already deepened. Hastily, she added: "It might help if you could bring yourself to tell me exactly why you stand in need of absolution." No sooner had she said it, however, than she jumped to the conclusion that it probably wouldn't.

"I fell," said the angel, yet again.

There was nothing in the least infuriating about the repetition, which somehow didn't even sound like a repetition, because the pathos wrapped up in the remark was still undergoing a stage-by-stage metamorphosis that had not yet reached its heart-rending end. That had to be the key, Molly thought. It had to be the vital clue, the vital cue, the vital Q to which she was required to find the A.

"I'm stupid, aren't I?" Molly whispered. "You keep telling me what the matter is, and I just keep missing

it. I keep getting hung up on the questions that don't have any answers, like where you fell from and what made you fall. The real point is that you're still falling, faster and faster, into time and into place and into the heart of the vortex of creation. Of course you don't know *why*, because there is no *why* in Heaven. All the worldly whys are in Hell, aren't they? Every last one."

"I don't know," said the angel, proving her point.

Molly realized that when she had first seen the angel he had been over six feet tall; even in the library he'd topped five-seven, but now he was no taller than she was. In a matter of hours, he'd be no bigger than a child – but still too old to grow wings and fly, even in his imagination.

She understood that her presence was making it worse, her nearness accelerating the process. She was a carrier of time and place, and she was furthering the angel's infection with every breath she took – but she knew that it wouldn't do any good at all to send him back out on to the street. There were five billion people in the great wide world, and they had thousands of years of history in them, and all those closest to hand were riddled and raddled with contagion.

In spite of her resolution, Molly sat down on the bed, next to the angel. He didn't reach out to her, but at least he didn't move away. He wasn't afraid.

She closed her eyes, as if she were a little girl confronted with a birthday cake or some other everyday prodigy, who had to close her eyes to make a wish if she were to stand any chance at all of making it come true.

"I'll tell you a funny thing about the human brain, Mr Angel," she said, speaking out of the darkness. "There are any number of ways to jolt it out of everyday misery, and all of them work for a while, but you can never get more than the merest delusory glimpse of Heaven. If you do something like heroin the brain just stops producing happy chemicals of its own, so when you try to give it up you just go crazy. It's different with E's and acid, but not so very different. Whatever the stuff gives you, you stop giving yourself, and when you stop doing the stuff because the effect's worn thin, you've lost it. People think it's just drugs, but it isn't. It's the same with everything you do that allows you to grasp the merest atom of delight. Fucking, dreaming, reading, kids... everything. Whatever gets you an inch nearer to Heaven only tantalizes once or twice, and then it starts to become as ordinary as anything else, and leaves you without the ability to do it for yourself if you don't get the fix – and if you can't handle that, you just go crazy.

"I don't have the slightest idea what Heaven is really like, Mr Angel, and I can't tell you anything about Hell, but I can tell you this: if you intend to stay here, you have to be able to handle it without going crazy. You have to realize that everything you try, everything you do and everything you think of will only seem to work once or twice, and that the best you can hope for afterwards is that things will stay *ordinary*. If you can't help going crazy, everything you think and feel and do thereafter will be a matter of trying to get back to the beginning, of trying to hold on without shrinking any

further and losing any more – because time leads nowhere except death, and you just have to learn to handle that, and get what you can out of a world without a Heaven. If you came here thinking that time heals, forget it, because time *wastes*. If you came here looking for a place to be, you shouldn't have bothered, because there's no place like home – and I don't mean that there's no place *like* home, I mean that there's *no place* even remotely like what you'd really like to think of as *home*. But you have to get used to that and make do with what there is, one way or another. You just have to *get used* to it, and *make do with what there is*, or else you get crazier and crazier and crazier until there's nothing left at all. Down here, you have to accept things as they are; there's no other way, except to oblivion.

"So if I were you, Mr Angel, I'd stop fucking around down here where you don't belong and go back where you came from, where you don't have any time to waste or any place to call anything. It doesn't matter how or why you fell – all you have to do is get up again, while you still can. If you don't, you'll become just as human as the rest of us, and the only way to get up will be the hard way. I'm going to open my eyes now, *and I want to see you gone*."

Molly knew, even before she opened her eyes, that the angel would be gone, and so he was – because he was still an angel, even if his wings had gone into hiding. She had pronounced far too many obscenities to sustain the sky in his eyes. She had shown him darkness, and she had scared him as shitless as only an entity who didn't need food *as such* could be. She wished that someone had done as much for her, way back when, although she knew perfectly well that she wouldn't have been able to take it in. Whatever else she'd been, she was no angel – but whatever she'd become, she was still the kind of person who could touch an angel, and do an angel a good turn.

She knew, even before she got down to the serious business of planning the rest of her day, that she would never know for sure whether she had passed the test, if it actually had been a test, or whether the angel really had decided to go back to the place from which he had fallen instead of all the way to Hell. In her experience, however, people mostly did go back to the place from which they had fallen, if they only could – and she now had no good reason to suppose that angels were any different.

That was why people like her almost always said "I fell" – and why it was hardly ever a lie. And that was why people like her still had it in them to get up again, even though they had no way to do it but the hard way.

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**Francis Amery's** first story about the adventures of Molly, "When Molly Met Elvis," appeared in *Interzone* 118. His other stories here have included "Lucifer's Comet" (issue 111) and "The Gift of the Magi" (issue 122).

# tranquillity

Mary Soon Lee

*Tuesday, February 11*

I took a dose of Lonely last night. I didn't plan to, but when I dropped Martin off at the airport he looked so excited about the trip, and then so tender as he hugged me goodbye. And I, I hugged him back, and tried to sound sincere when I said I'd miss him, but inside I felt nothing except a twinge of envy.

How can Martin still be excited about travelling? The household computer says this is his 67th business trip since we got married.

How can he still be interested in me?

Driving home along the freeway, I took a strip of Tranquillity pills out of my purse. I had the foil torn when the idiot in front of me slowed down for no reason. The pill shot out of my fingers as I braked, and landed on the floor in front of the passenger seat.

Scrambling to reach the pill while driving, trying not to cause an accident, I had a sudden picture of myself in 20 years time, grey-haired and wrinkled, still popping Tranquillity. A 60-year-old addict who never even managed to have children, but no matter, because nothing can touch her while she floats on her little yellow pill-shaped island of calm contentment.

You need a prescription to get the Joy pills or the Libido pills, and none of the negative mood-switchers have ever been legalized. But the doctors and the therapists and the talk-show hosts all swear by Tranquillity. Mom bought me my first strip, a few months after I married Martin, when he was away on a business trip. I'd mentioned on the phone that I was feeling vaguely depressed, and the next morning Interflora delivered a bunch of carnations and a gift-wrapped strip of six Tranquillity pills.

My ex-therapist told me it's not a sign of failure to take Tranquillity. But that's what it seemed to me, driving along 511 last night. So I left the yellow pill lying on the car floor, and drove into the east side of

downtown where the hookers and the pushers hang out. For 300 dollars I bought what the man called the Complete Negative Cuisine, double-doses of each of five banned mood-switchers.

There's been so much bad publicity about the Negatives that I didn't dare take one while I was driving. But as soon as I got back to our apartment, I dry-swallowed the pair of Lonelys, and put on a Blues CD.

Slowly, slowly an ache lodged inside me as I listened to Louis Armstrong. Sadness swelled behind each sound of the trumpet, the notes rising and falling around me like rain on an empty street. It was the night my first date stood me up; it was the year no one remembered my birthday. A coffee-mug Martin had left on the bookshelves said *he's gone, gone*.

The music haunted me, filled me – I switched it off, reached for the TV remote control.

*We're together*, mocked the sitcom family as they stared out of the screen at me, sitting by myself on the sofa. Canned laughter followed me into the kitchen as I hunted for a drink. I had a glass of whisky, then another. I don't like whisky, but the heat chased through me, taking the edge off my mood until it settled into me, a muted whisper of aloneness, sweet as the moment when the hero rides off into the sunset, leaving the girl behind.

I turned off the TV, and stared out the window. The crescent moon coasted across the sky. I cried for the first time in years, because of the moon, because I'd never realized how beautiful it was, because there was no one to watch it with me.

At one a.m., I lay down in our double bed, my head buried in a shirt that still smelled faintly of Martin.

*Wednesday, February 12*

Lonely is fine for an experiment, I don't regret taking it. But when the dose wore off, nothing had changed. I

was still stuck in the apartment like an expensive accessory, waiting for Martin to return. By early this afternoon I had browsed through every single store in a dozen virtual malls, and every one of them bored me.

I felt washed out, the world a flat and empty expanse of greyness. Normally I'd pop a Tranquillity, just like Martin tells me to do, and wait for the colour to return. But today I picked up the Negative Cuisine, and considered the four remaining packets: Righteous Fury, Envy, Grief, and Fear.

Grief seemed too similar to Lonely, so I put that one aside, and Fear scared me even without sampling it, so I put that one aside as well.

Righteous Fury or Envy? The Fury came in a red packet, the Envy in a green one. In the end I popped the Envy just because I liked the shade of vivid green. I waited impatiently, watching the clock, but nothing happened. After half an hour, I gave up and decided to take a walk outside.

Opening the coat-closet, I saw one of Martin's sports jackets lying on the floor. Typical of him, expecting me to tidy up. He says he has more important things to do, but I could have had, too. Just before our wedding, my company offered me a promotion, but only if I moved to Atlanta.

Martin said he'd understand completely if I accepted the promotion, but that he didn't think it would be fair to either of us to have a long-distance marriage, and he couldn't move at the moment – maybe in a year or two. And so I turned down the promotion. Then once we were married, Martin complained about how much time I spent working. A few months later, I quit my job altogether.

On the way to the airport this Monday, he called me his Lady of Leisure, and said he wished he could be a kept man. I *hate* it when he does that. Martin may play the innocent, but he'd never seriously consider trading places.

I picked his sports jacket off the closet floor, and threw it into a trash can. Grabbing my brown coat, I left the apartment.

The park was almost empty, probably because other people had better things to do than wander around on an overcast afternoon. For a while I watched a young man throwing sticks for a Labrador. I prefer cats to dogs, but the longer I stood there, the more I wanted the Labrador with its non-stop enthusiasm. I wanted to be the one it ran to, its tongue lolling out, its nose shining wetly.

Amused by how effective the pills must be to make me want the man's dog, I continued along the path. A woman laughed ahead of me, and then a second laugh, higher, childish, heartbreaking. I turned away, I did turn away, I did. I knew I wasn't ready.

But I could still hear them: the child's voice rising in question, and the woman answering. I walked away, faster and faster. Not mine, the child wasn't mine to have. However much I wanted it, I couldn't make it mine. A boy, a girl, the doctor wouldn't tell me which it was. The tests said I was fine, Martin was fine, but after my first miscarriage, I never got pregnant again,

and they refused to recommend me as an adoptive parent. "Too needy" said the social worker, as if only those women who didn't really want children should have them.

I got back to the apartment without making a scene, but I can't stand how I feel. I swallowed two Tranquillitys an hour ago, but they don't seem to have worked. I'm going to take a couple of Martin's sleeping tablets.

#### *Thursday, February 13*

I slept until noon, and woke feeling as if I'd been trampled on all night long. The Fear, Fury, and Grief beckoned to me from the bedside table, but today I am going to be strong. If I had seen that child yesterday, I'm not sure what I would have done.

I took Martin's sports jacket out of the trash and sent it to be dry-cleaned.

I should flush the remaining pills down the toilet. I will. I will do so.

#### *Friday, February 14*

Martin phoned this morning to wish me Happy Valentine's Day. He said he missed me, and I think he meant it. He waited a while after he'd said it, and so finally, feeling guilty, I told him how lonely I'd been on Monday night, without explaining why.

Martin murmured reassurances, and promised he'd be home in time for lunch on Sunday. I made an excuse to cut the phone call short.

Maybe we ought to get a divorce, but I can't summon up the energy. I guess I still like Martin, but love him? No. Not for a long time. Maybe if I had bought Joy and Libido from the pusher, they would have held us together.

But I don't think so.

Kelly dropped in this afternoon. She wanted to show off her dress, the latest Digidap, which heats, cools, and massages the wearer while actively adapting her figure to any of a dozen profiles. Kelly thought her boyfriend would like the big-busted style; I thought it made Kelly look like a freak, but I didn't say so.

"We're going out tonight," said Kelly. "Valentine date. He's hired a sailboat and crew to take us round the lake."

"Good for you," I said as brightly as I could manage. I knew Martin was busy, and he had remembered to phone, but would it really have been too much effort to send me roses? I tried to hold onto that anger, but by the time Kelly left it had faded into a background greyness. I reached for my strip of Tranquillity automatically, but instead I pulled the Righteous Fury out of my purse.

I had meant to get rid of the remaining Negatives, but in the end I had only flushed the Fear away. I fished the Grief out of my purse as well. The man had sold me double-doses of both, but what if I broke one of the pills, and took only a tiny bit? Surely that couldn't have much effect, just enough to drive away the grey.



I crumbled the Righteous Fury over the coffee-table, and swallowed a pinch of the red powder.

The walls seemed to shrink in on me. I needed to move, to stretch. I paced the apartment, my cheeks burning. Martin's mess infuriated me: the dust from his shaving all over the bathroom counter, a dirty sock wedged under an armchair, his mouldering collection of 19th-century books.

I tore the first chapter from one of his books, piled the sheets in the sink, and lit the pyre with a match. The dance of the flames fascinated me, but it didn't last long enough. I tore out chapter two, burned it, burned the rest of the book, page by page, coughing as the kitchen filled with smoke.

I grabbed more of Martin's books, ripped out pages, hurled the remains onto the floor along with everything else of his I could find – clothes, photos, stupid plastic windup toys he'd collected as a boy. The toys cracked when I stamped on them, momentarily satisfying. But I didn't want to break Martin's toys, I wanted to break *him*, to snap his spine like a plastic toy.

No, not quite: I wanted something slower, something longer. And then it came to me, such a simple idea. I would buy more Fear, mix the powder into Martin's meals, only a little at first, so that he didn't realize what was happening, and I could watch him coming apart, piece by piece.

ing, last night's anger drowned in a sea of grey. I told myself I ought to get dressed, and go and buy the Fear, but the longer I lay there, the worse the plan seemed. I didn't want to hurt Martin, I just wanted him to understand.

The day stretched ahead of me like a prison sentence, empty of purpose. To drive away the grey, I swallowed the Grief and what remained of the Fury. But nothing changed, nothing changed, except that I saw my whole future marching toward me, day after endless day.

Martin never understands. He tells me that he's happy, how lucky we both are, how I should be happy too. How can he be happy? Doesn't he even see what's missing, *who's* missing – all those times I went to the fertility clinic, and Martin said not to waste money, nothing's wrong with you.

Nothing's wrong with me, but I hate him.

Nothing's wrong, because now I know how to make Martin remember, how to make him understand what it's like to wake up to an empty future.

I'm feeling calmer now. I took three strips of Tranquillity and the rest of Martin's sleeping tablets. It shouldn't take long.

Saturday, February 15

It took me half an hour to get out of bed this morn-

Mary Soon Lee last appeared here just a month ago with her story "Lifework."

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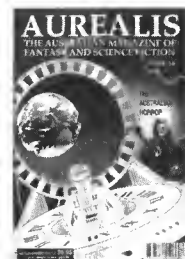
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Considering all successful movies end up as PlayStation spinoffs, it's remarkable how little deep understanding the movies have so far shown of the entertainment technology that's effectively swallowing them whole. All they can manage, from *Tron* to *The Matrix*, is an opportunistic subgenre of eyepopping lawnmower-people movies, whose basic plea is "Look, we can do this too, but big, with money! who needs interactivity when you can have us, your old friends? please? PS now buy the game." Yet this is the artform whose descendants, for an absolute certainty, will occupy the same commercial and cultural role in our children's century that cinema has in our own; whose profitability is already changing the shape (and ownership) of Hollywood studio economics; which is subtly, permanently rewriting the rules of storytelling itself; and which is in the throes of a rapid and radical media evolution towards forms of delivery more immersive and real than anything hitherto assisted by chemical refreshments.

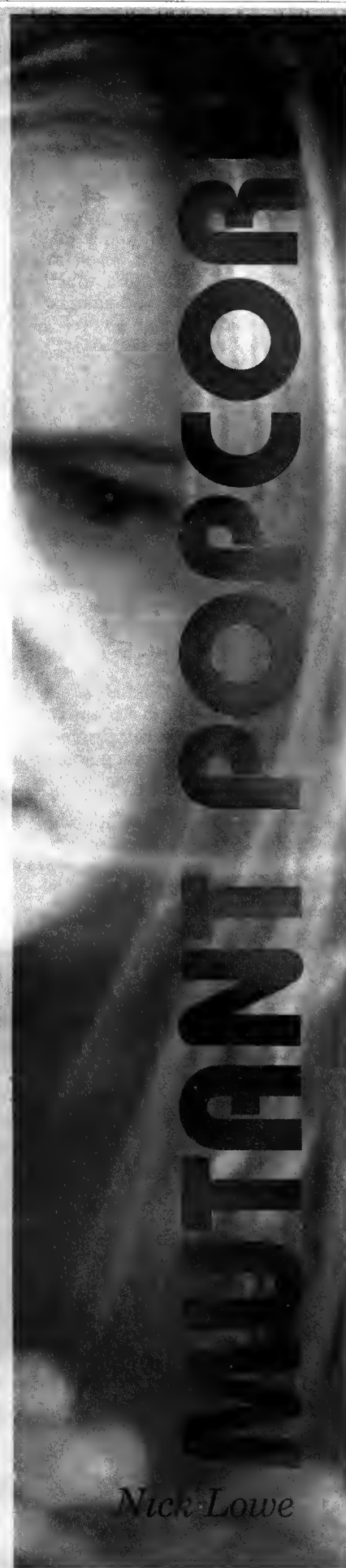
It's a subject that certainly cries out to be a Cronenberg movie – ideally a 1980s one, but we have to be grateful for what we can get. The big idea in *eXistenZ* is that computer games are the missing link in the evolution of entertainment between movies and sex: a form of clumsy narrative art that nevertheless manages to be intense, obsessive, addictive, risky, and above all humungously yucky. Most of Cronenberg's core oeuvre has been about the quest for a transcendent mode of experience that fuses cinema, drugs and lubricities of the flesh; and simply as a distillation of his life's work's quest, this is the one, no question. Hallucinated reality delivered from neural PlayStations like exterior wombs with fleshy umbilicals that plug directly into artificial sphincters in the base of your spine (and subject to nasty infections); mutant trout farms, two-headed newts, psychotic backwoods mechanics with a dodgy line in amateur spinal proctology – and yet it's all really about art and terrorism, Salman Rushdie, and Cronenberg's feelings towards Westminster Council. (It must have been around this point in the pitch that MGM hit the button under the desk marked TURNAROUND.)

On paper, it looks brilliant: great idea, great plot premise (Jennifer Jason Leigh's game genius on the run from a fundamentalist fatwa issued by reality-fixated fundamentalists, pursuing her through level after Dickian level of ever-leakier game reality). Partnering her with Jude Law's wimpy cybervirgin not only

allows the plugged-in spectator to experience the world of the games addict from the outside, but gives Cronenberg the chance to drive home the gleeful sexual allegory with a portable diesel ramrod. Fifteen years earlier, however, this would have been a studio movie from a great and serious entertainer at his commercial peak; in 1999 it's an independent production, waved in by a parade of In-Association-With banners, from a mature, respected artist with a line in unfilmable novels and a mounting indifference to narrative, character and commercial cinema values. And that's where things start to slip.

For *eXistenZ* (just think how hard he must have had to fight for a name that stupid) is a perverse little mutation in all available ways. So determined is it to resist the glossy formulae of VR-movie look and narrative that it goes out of its way to avoid entertaining. It's one thing for Cronenberg to try and reinvent the genre with a radically distinctive look and feel – postindustrial, postreal, a world in which a culture of virtual experience and a radical shift to biotech have conspired to obliterate the 20th-century landscape with a deceptively pastoral world where all the 20th-century buildings have been repurposed to postmillennial functions. It's riskier to play games with the conventions of the VR-movie genre itself, pointedly excising even the normally-obligatory first-act taster dip into the virtual environment. (Cronenberg's since admitted that he toyed with the idea of withholding any glimpse of the game itself, which clearly would have been taking perversion to perversity.)

But the most serious trouble lies deeper. The *eXistenZ* game, supposedly a world-beater, looks like the world's least enjoyable game ever: no action, little gameplay, no narrative propulsion, lots of confusing and pointless twists, easy clues, unappealing situations, wildly unattractive designs, and nothing for most of the multiplayer cast to do that would explain why anyone would wish to take those characters' roles. "I don't like it here," grumbles Jude: "we're just stumbling around in this unformed world whose rules and directives are unknown." Bit like *Naked Lunch*, really; but that's precisely the problem. Most of Cronenberg's films since *Videodrome* have been about addiction, but there's no sign that he actually enjoys Nintendo, any more than he does drugs or car crashes. This is a worry, because the crucial difference from his previous films is that a majority of his audience do. Cronenberg has clearly looked thoughtfully into game culture, but



his firsthand experience of gameplay is confessedly limited to a couple of titles, and it's hard to see much empathy with the genre, which itself has evolved almost unrecognizably over the time of the project's development. (He admits to playing *Myst*, but doesn't say whether he enjoyed it; presumably not, or he'd have waded through the sequel as well.)

In many ways it's still wonderful stuff; but it would have taken so little to make this an exciting film, which on the whole it's not, and a commercial US studio project rather than an over-priced Anglo-Canadian arthouse/fleapit crossbreed. There are glorious Cronenberg moments: the Chinese meal from hell is right up there with the gynaecology kit from *Dead Ringers*, the squirmy visual effects are the best he's ever delivered, and longtime scoreperson Howard Shore is on fabulous form (now with added theremin). But Cronenberg's aspiration to be Peter Greenaway seems to have infected his dialogue, and like his hero he's taken to hiring and wasting stupendous casts as a substitute for writing the characters properly in the first place. JJL, in particular is without doubt the nearest thing we have to a millennial screen goddess, and bless her to bits for blowing off the Kubrick reshoots for this distinctly less career-boosting proposition, but while as ever she delivers ten times the value anyone else would from her part, she's in serious trouble with reclusive yet supercool game-design genius Allegra Geller – even if you make space for the possibility that she and everyone else may turn out to be merely a fantasy character in a game designed by some pallid immigrant SQUIDhead with a doleful haircut. (I hope I'm spoiling nothing if I say that there's a point where everything in the movie so far turns out to be part of a higher-level game; and that of the numerous Dick models that come to mind, the best fit is ultimately with *Ubik*.) As a Cronenberg homage to himself, it's a classic of sorts; but you do get the feeling he's trying to remember how he used to do it.

An even more welcome, even more flawed meditation on gameplay by a veteran genre hero arrives from, of all people, the pushing-80 director of 1962's *La Jetée*, which remains for a significant number of certain-agers the greatest sf film of all time. Made on video three years ago for Canal+, the subtitled film print of Chris Marker's *Level 5* did the round of festivals in 1997 but only now has managed a theatrical release in the UK. Why now, I've no idea; you'd have thought the remake of his classic as *Twelve Monkeys* would have been the ideal event for a piggyback. But bet-

ter late than lost, and apart from all else a fascinating glimpse of what Marker's been up to since he largely retired to TV.

Like the last and greatest Marker film to play here, 1982's *Sunless*, *Level 5* is a kind of expanded documentary. Its subject is the extraordinary, nigh-untellable story of the 1945 tragedy of Okinawa, sacrificed by Japan in the final battle of WW2 with the mass suicide of a third of the gentle, guileless inhabitants, persuaded that the invading Americans were savage subhuman demons who would rape and torture them to death. Marker has put together what by conventional standards would merely have been a stunning, heartbreaking documentary on an astonishing and (as the film stresses) largely-forgotten



*eXistenZ*: previous page: Jennifer Jason Leigh. Above, clockwise from top left: Ian Holm, daVid Cronenberg, Willem Dafoe and Jude Law.

manifestation of human horror. Contemporary footage of the archipelago (returned to Japan in 1972) and its own memorials are intercut with interviews with historians, survivors and witnesses – including Nagisa Oshima, who as a young man worked with a military film unit. The climax is an unforgettable interview with Shinkeacha Kinjo, now a Christian convert and minister campaigning against the obliteration of the war from Japanese school history teaching, who calmly recounts his terrible mercy-killing of his mother and two younger siblings to save them from what they all believed were the far greater horrors in store if they surrendered to the Yankee monsters.

That's level one. (Well, actually it's not, as the film defines them, but you don't want to know.) But Marker, uncomfortable as ever with the reas-

suring tropes of conventional documentary format, especially with a subject as impassioning as this, has superimposed a strange, only partly successful fictional narrative of bereavement, grieving, and uneasy coming to terms. In a near-future game-design studio Catherine Belkhodja (the only actor in the film) tapes a video diary of her futile attempt to change the past by playing the incomplete computer game of the battle left unfinished by her dead partner. It soon becomes clear that the game resists all attempts to revise history, mirroring her own doomed attempts to retrieve her lost lover in memory. ("Memorizing things in order to revive them," she concludes in a characteristically compacted and portentous aphorism, "is an illusion of the 20th century.") Marker's film, with voiceover playing himself, purports to be his own record of her diary and quest, weaving in the unplayable game footage and layers of documentary material.

The main hazard in all this is that the superimposed fictional and formal doodling inevitably comes over as precious, self-indulgent onanizing when set against the almost unbearable reality of the calmly-recounted horrors. Marker's clearly worried, after more than half a century in the business, about the way Japan's own wilful oblivion only confirms the way history itself is manipulated or erased, and on one of its own levels *Level 5* is a veteran documentarist's meditation on the way newer forms of interactive edutainment (in games and simulations, in web-trawling, in museum displays and historical tourism) are changing the way we engage with the past. The importance of this agenda is hard to question, even if it means in practice that the fictional narrative is at best a tiresome device and at worst an interminable maudlin display of autoproctoscophilia. On the plus side, Belkhodja does deliver a painfully convincing portrait of bereavement – this definitely isn't a film to watch if your cat's been run over – in what is essentially a fixed-camera, talking-head performance. Not fun to watch, but haunting as hell to have seen; and it does have one game-of-the-movie joke that beats anything in *eXistenZ*. "I tried the Marienbad game," reports Belkhodja glumly. "After a few minutes the computer said: I won already, but we can go on if you like." You probably have to be the kind of person who'd want to play that game in order to want to watch this one; but bagsy be Delphine Seyrig. Any chance of *The Palm Beach Story* for Megadrive?

Nick Lowe

# Dream Blue Murder

*Dominic Green*

**H**e was undersea again. It was cold, freezing cold, closing in, crushing the warmth out of every bone and sinew. He could not breathe, for the muscles of his ribcage would not respond, frozen by the cold, and even if they had been able to, he knew they would not be able to push out against the pressure, and even if they had been able to push, he knew that what he would be breathing would not be air.

There was air, he knew, above. But between it and him was the Barrier. Terrified of hanging in midwater in the dark that was not dark, not quite pitch black enough for him not to be able to see the thing he feared, he kicked out for the Barrier and braced itself for its feeling even colder against his splayed-out fingers. But he was safer up here, he knew, safe among the pressure ridges. The Barrier, a roof of ice across the world, brittle as icing sugar, hard as steel, which would melt at the touch of a hand, but which would then refreeze and make the hand part of itself, incapable of being tugged free. He had oxygen only for a few minutes, he knew; besides, the cold would probably kill him before anoxia would. Emboldened by this knowledge, and feeling no searing pain in his lungs as yet, he kicked out off one of the pressure ridges and began searching the base of the Barrier for Thin Ice.

Such was the thickness of the ice that no light penetrated through it, steely grey rather than arctic blue, lit from below rather than above, like a movie set. The incongruity of this occurred to him on a purely intellectual level, but did not reach him to the extent that he looked down for the light source. He was, after all, too busy. He had to find the Opening before what he knew to be down here found him.

And finally, there it was; a tiny, almost imperceptible circle of lighter grey, invisible to any eyes save his,

which had been here a thousand times before. He began to swim upwards at it, sure that his upward velocity would power him up through the crust of ice lying like an eggshell on the cold water surface. But the tiny circle did not grow less tiny at quite the speed he had expected, and now he realized the awful truth he had eventually realized every previous time; that the pressure ridges were not the size of sand dunes or of hiding places for humans, but of hills, even of mountains, seeming to grow even as he swam, almost as if freezing downwards faster than he could move. And as he swam, he felt the almost imperceptible cold stirrings in the turbid current that meant that the Denizen had realized he was down here all along, and was Coming to Keep Him Company.

His hands touched the ice surface almost with his realization, and he realized simultaneously that the thickness of the ice had grown and frozen too as he had ascended. It was now like a thick sheet of glass in which he could, in defiance of all laws of optics, see both his face, and also the outlying, mountain-sized extremities of the Thing that was rising through the murky silty deep to find him.

He hammered on the glass frantically, harder than he would have believed possible. In the pseudo-zero gravity, he bounced off the glass like a cold wet astronaut. But he had made a hairline crack; he could see it glinting in what was unmistakably the sunshine. Quickly now, quickly and carefully, he rose, turning on his flippers (for he was now acquiring a more powerful and torpedolike bodyform, together with whiskers that twitched nervously as the Aquatic Thing approached) and chewing out a thin circle of sea ice with his head. The sea ice, despite being sea ice, tasted of fresh water, and he had cleared the waterline with his neck in a dazzling toothpaste-bright circle of snow and sun and blue sky the



colour of the Virgin Mary. He raised his suddenly human hands to find purchase on the slippery sides of the ice, but could not fit them past his ears through the crack; and then he felt something pulling at his leg.

Gently at first, it tugged, and tentatively, like a creeping vine; then, it coiled round his leg and pulled like a devil on Angel Dust. He scrabbled at the ice, and felt spicules drive bloody wedges under his fingernails, but with only one more tug, he was going down like an express elevator in the centre of a glade of tentacles which was big enough to drag down ships, and which he knew on anatomically accurate cephalopod illustrations surrounded a beak Heavy Enough to Sever Heavy Wire...

He sat up in bed, covered in a salty sweat so cold as to freeze as it left the pores. As usual. He bent forward over the duvet, shook his head to clear it, swung his legs onto the floor and into his slippers in one practised motion, rose, and stumbled in the direction of the lavatory. He peed in the lavatory, but didn't flush it, so as not to wake Mother in the next room, brushed his teeth, yawned, and began to take his jimjams off ready to put on his suit for a Bright New Day.

"I don't know what it means. I just know it, front to back."

Inkerman, his fellow strap-hanger on the Tube, moved over to let into the carriage an amorphous column of purdah in the centre of which the presence of a fat Arab lady could be hypothesized.

"How often do you have this dream?"

Norman's face subsided into an expression of utter despair. "Every night, since I was twelve years old."

"And every night it's the same as always?"

A young blonde girl was looking at Norman fixedly. Norman became suddenly, sweatily aware that they were wearing the same shade of corduroy, a potential conversation-opener. "As fresh as new-fallen snow on newly-frozen ice and as bloody frightening as ever. No matter what I do, no matter which way I swim, I'm always Downward Bound."

"Why don't you go and see a psychiatrist?" said Inkerman, moving aside for a pimpled adolescent carrying his ghetto blaster like a shoulder-fired bazooka.

"I'm not mad," said Norman madly.

"Of course not," said Inkerman in an unconvincing manner. "Let's see – not mad, so what about a hypnotist?"

"Mother doesn't trust hypnotists," said Norman. "She wouldn't feel right if someone else were giving me instructions that had to be obeyed."

"I don't wish to say a thing that's been said before, old chap," said Inkerman, "but why not just not tell her?"

Norman shuddered just as he had done underwater in his dreams. "She'd find out," he said. "She always does."

The youth found the RADIO/TAPE/CD selector and his Radio Bazooka went off, firing its contents into Norman's left ear. Oddly enough, it was Radio 4 that came on. The youth struggled frantically with his

piece in an attempt to find something more offensive.

– WOODS HOLE REPORTS THAT THE USS 'TOAD-FISH', A 'CYCLOPS' CLASS US NAVY SUBMARINE, HAS BATTERED HER WAY THROUGH THE ARCTIC WINTER ICE USING HER POWERFUL TITANIUM FIN –"

The young blonde looked at Norman in a way which suggested she knew he was not about to open communications. Norman stared back helplessly in a way which suggested he knew this just as well. He pressed up hard against the fat Arab lady – without really meaning too, of course – and ground his teeth.

Oddly enough, the fat Arab lady pressed back.

"I've got just the answer for you, chappie."

The voice was not Inkerman's, but that of Hythe, the office alpha-male-in-waiting. Norman and all the other males knew that Dave Scut, the Sales Liaison Consultant, who had been blessed with a craggy jaw, a loud commanding voice, and buttocks that a pencil could be positioned between without falling, was the office's pack leader, but Hythe was biding his time, forever attempting to impress the entirely female secretarial pool at the Equal Opportunities Company – and occasionally, infuriatingly, Estelle Eszterhazy from Credit Control, whom Norman worshipped from such an astronomical farness that, if she ever spoke to him, the sound of her voice took ten seconds to reach him before he could respond. Hythe's courtship display involved taking up, or at least buying magazines bearing pictures of, countless numbers of new sports, health pursuits and exotic Brazilian martial arts. Last week it had been Traditional Mexican Pelote, the week before that Full Contact Qigong Sparring. Today it was something which he thrust under Norman's nose, and which was called the "ALP DREAMER! WAKE UP AND DIRECT YOUR DREAMS FROM WITHIN!"

Norman, more stimulated by the glossy magazine pages than he usually was by Hythe's daily foibles, became suddenly fully alert.

"For millions of years, Men have dreamed, even before they were Men," the blurb began. Norman was not quite sure what the first sentence meant, but he continued reading: "Dogs dream, cats dream. Common or garden earthworms have been observed to dream, even though they have no Eyes that can be said to move Rapidly. Since one second after the first dream was dreamed, Men have dreamed of being Masters of the fabric of their Dreams. Now YOU can do this with ALP – Auro-Linguistic Programming. The Auro-Linguistic Programming ALPDreamer senses Rapid Eye Movement *as you sleep* and wakes you *without actually waking you* in the middle of your dream. With practice, it is possible to wake up and CONTROL YOUR DREAMS in a somnolent state. Price only £299.99 from Pyramid Products, Credit Card Orders accepted."

The advertisement included a picture of a happy, tanned couple wearing gigantic rubber goggles evidently designed to fit over the eyes, wired to a machine with many flashing lights. It did not look worth the price of £299.99.

Norman reached for his phone, reached for his wal-

let and took out his credit card.

NO PAINFUL SURGERY IS REQUIRED TO INSERT YOUR ALPDREAMER™ SELF IMPROVEMENT DEVICE, advised the brightly-coloured box inside the plain-wrapped packaging. AFTER THE EXTERNAL GOGGLES HAVE PROGRAMMED YOUR NEOCORTEX TO ACCEPT AUROLINGUISTIC COMMANDS, ONLY THE ALMOST UNDETECTABLE HEAD-MOUNTED IMPLANT NEED BE WORN, AND CAN BE COMPLETELY CONCEALED UNDER A LARGE HAT, HELMET OR HAIRPIECE.

The Device was smaller than it had appeared in the advertisement, and a small piece broke off the side of it when he ripped it out of the packet, but no matter. He clapped both sides of it round his head, took out the User Guide, and discarded the small white booklet labelled WARNING! AURO-LINGUISTIC PROGRAMMING CAN CAUSE DEATH. For a sophisticated mind control device, the thing had disappointingly few wires.

WARNING! said the ALPDreamer™ Installation Manual. PLEASE MAKE SURE THAT ALL THE ALPDREAMER™ CONNECTION LEADS ARE SECURE AROUND THE HEAD. ALPDREAM™ ACTIVITY CAN BE VIOLENT AND RESULT IN VIGOROUS MOVEMENT OF THE SKULL.

Norman read in the manual that the installation of an ALPDream™ device employed an area of the brain which had never been observed to be active except in speakers of Mandarin Chinese. The manual contained a firm warning to all Mandarin speakers that the insertion of an ALPDreamer™ would prevent any further use of the language.

It was a difficult choice to make. Who was Norman to say whether or not he would, at some future date, require to be fluent in Mandarin Chinese? However, he steeled himself and read on.

INSTALLATION, announced the manual. HOLD THE DRILL BIT OF THE ALPDREAMER™ CLOSE TO YOUR LEFT TEMPLE, POINTING INWARD. PULL THE TRIGGER.

Norman pulled the trigger, and felt a sharp pain in the side of his head, as if he had been bitten by a fly. YOU MAY FEEL A SMARTING SENSATION AS THE ANAESTHETIC DART PENETRATES YOUR SKIN, said the manual. DO NOT BE AFRAID. THE BRAIN ITSELF CONTAINS NO PAIN NERVES. NO MATTER HOW LARGE THE OBJECT DRIVEN INTO A HUMAN BRAIN, NO PAIN WILL RESULT. LOOK AT THE PICTURE OF THE NAKED WOMAN IN THE MANUAL, FIG. 4A. IF YOU ARE A WOMAN, OR WOULD PREFER TO LOOK AT THE NAKED MAN, LOOK AT THE NAKED MAN. THE ALPDREAMER™ HOMES IN ON ELECTRICAL ACTIVITY IN THOSE AREAS OF THE BRAIN EXCITED BY SEXUAL STIMULUS. WARNING: IF YOU SUFFER FROM PERVERSE OR FRIGID SEXUAL IMPULSES, THE ALPDREAMER™ MAY FAIL TO INSERT CORRECTLY AND, IN A MINORITY OF CASES, CHEW ITS WAY DOWN YOUR SPINAL COLUMN UNTIL IT REACHES YOUR SACRUM. IN THESE RARE CIRCUMSTANCES, NO RESPONSIBILITY WILL BE ACCEPTED...

The fly had laid a maggot. A huge maggot, big as a baby's arm, worming its way into his juicy convoluted hemispheres. Norman stared at the picture of the woman and willed himself to feel sexy.

In the tiny living room downstairs, Mother had her television on. The noise of the soft-spoken, nice young presenter, whom Norman knew to be a Rumoured Homosexual, rumbled through the floorboards.

– OUR POWERFUL TITANIUM FIN IS CAPABLE OF DEEPLY PENETRATING ICE IN THE COLDEST OF REGIONS.

– HOW INTERESTING, CAPTAIN. DOESN'T IT GET TERRIBLY LONELY DOWN THERE IN THE ANTARCTIC?

– WE MAKE OUR OWN ENTERTAINMENT WITH THE PENGUINS, PHILIP.

– WHAT DO YOU SAY TO PEOPLE WHO ASK YOU WHY YOU BECAME THE CAPTAIN OF A NUCLEAR SUBMARINE WITH THE CAPABILITY TO DESTROY ENTIRE CITIES FULL OF HUMAN SOULS?

– RELAX. ALLOW YOURSELF TO DRIFT INTO SLEEP IN A COMPLETELY NORMAL MANNER, AS IF THE ALP AUROLINGUISTIC DREAMER WERE NOT SECURELY CLAMPED TO YOUR FOREHEAD. AT THIS POINT WE ARE OBLIGED TO COMMUNICATE HM HEALTH DEPARTMENT'S WARNING – AUROLINGUISTIC PROGRAMMING CAN CAUSE UNPREDICTABLE AND DANGEROUS...

– IT BREAKS THE ICE AT PARTIES.

Ice. Heavy as a dead womb-wall over the world. Hollywood ice stalactites hanging down in a saline water world where no icicles could form.

Norman considered his options in his new environment a moment, then kicked for the surface. The sun was a pale grey circle in the ice above, dim as a wrist-watch light reflecting off dull steel plate a kilometre away.

– THIS IS YOUR MID-DREAM WAKE-UP CALL, MR NORMAN!

And then he *really was* in the dream. He couldn't breathe. The cold had paralyzed his lungs. His lips longed to spasm open and fill his ribcage with healthy salt water. His eyes stung like a pair of electrified testicles behind his eyelids at the burning cold ocean. He swam frantically in the wrong direction, not knowing which way was up. He collided with ice walls colder than the water, hard as steel. He was in real freezing cold arctic water, becoming more and more immobile, like a fly in icy amber – a tentacle coiled round his leg...

He woke up. The room was cold. The bedsheets were kicked off around his ankles. The dream, if that was possible, was worse than it had ever been. Drat the device! He sat up in bed, pulled the covers back up round his neck so that only his eyes showed, and stared out like a lurking crocodile from under the floral polyester.

He thought for a moment of unclipping the device, then throwing it across the room where it would shatter into a million doubtless Japanese plastic parts.

(– IN THE FIRST DAY OF USING YOUR ALPDREAMER™ ELECTRONIC DREAM CONTROL DEVICE, YOU MAY FEEL YOU WANT TO DISCARD THE MACHINE. DO NOT DO THIS. PERSEVERE WITH THE ALPDREAMER™ AND YOU WILL GRADUALLY LEARN TO CONTROL YOUR DREAMS WITH THE SKILL OF AN EXPERIENCED ASTRONAUT. RIDE THE BRAINWAVES! SURF THE CEREBELLUM!)

He was very tired. He had finished the Monthly

Roll-Over only that evening. He lay in his headset, staring in the ceiling. It was two a.m. by the bedside clock, and he was tired...

He lay in the cold current, staring at the ice ceiling. He lazily righted himself and paddled through numerous full circles in the water, looking fearfully for a way up to where there was warmth and oxygen.

*Oh my God I can't breathe...*

THE ALPDREAMER™ CORPORATION WOULD LIKE TO REMIND YOU THAT YOU ARE DREAMING.

*Whoopee! I can have all the oxygen I want.*

*(You're losing time. Every second down here comes closer to killing you.)*

He had to stay up top, around the pressure ridges where the current underwater was emasculated by the ice.

*But I have to swim down too. There's no way up through this stuff. I can see birds in the sky above, but the ice is like banking glass, even if I hammer on it I can't break it. And anyway, I can't get any purchase to hammer underwater.*

*I have to go down.*

The pressure increased. The pressure ridge attempted to grow downward and become an inverted mountain in the cold, but he rethought, put a hand on it and stopped it. He slipped over the pressure ridge and began rising like a football in a swimming pool. A tiny circle of glittering blue shone like a billionaire's roulette chip. The ice could only be the thickness of a contact lens – no, contact lenses were the wrong idea. His hands feebly searched the wobbling, bending surface, his mouth seeking the few bubbles of oxygen that had crept under the lens...

Rethink. His head smashed through the icy surface as if a bouncer had rammed his head through a window. Bleeding but happy, he paddled around in bobbing chunks of slush. But there was now a problem. The ice was so insubstantial that he could get no purchase on it. Ice cliffs towered round him, but every time he flailed his arms to snatch hold of the tinkling floating fragments, he grabbed only crushed ice and water. He might as well have been floating in the open sea.

Then a tentacle coiled round his leg and yanked him down like a bellrope.

He sat up in bed. He felt his bed for tentacles. He walked round the bedroom cautiously, examining all the closets for lurking cephalopods.

Luckily he hadn't been *thrashing about*. Mother complained when he *thrashed about* in bed. She listened with a toothmug jammed to the wall, he knew. He normally seemed to *thrash about* during less unpleasant dreams than this, however, and Mother now refused to wash his bedclothes unless he wore a pair of underpants in bed.

He looked up at the bedside clock, muffled so as not to wake Mother. It was four a.m.

The Ice Hole was above him, rippling like a blue silk camisole in a breeze. He didn't have to break through

it this time. He allowed himself to rise like phytoplankton in the gentle warm upwelling from a sub-arctic oceanic volcano.

His head broke the surface. The sun was warm on his face. He put his hand out, and dug it into the cold solid snow on top of a passing icebergleet. He hauled his belly onto the iceberg, glad of its bottom-heaviness. He was just about to pull his leg out of the water when an insidious, rubbery tentacle wrapped around his calf.

"Bugger off!" he said. "Bugger off!"

He turned round on the ice floe, grabbed hold of the tentacle, and dug his heels – which were shod, he decided, with heavy Alpine crampons – into the ice, and pulled. The tentacle pulled back. It did not pull hard enough. He stayed up on the floe, up and in the air.

Then he remembered how many tentacles a cephalopod had.

The other tentacles exploded out of the water, grabbed him and pulled him forward into the water, an even more horrible fate than usual since he was looking the thing he was being pulled down into in the face and feet as it blew bubbles up at him, and he was awake, since his headset had instructed him that This Was No Dream...

His heart was beating fast enough to be two hearts in sync, like octopus hearts, when he woke up from the non-dream.

What had the thing looked like? Had it been squid, or cuttlefish, or octopus?

In the other room, Mother was snoring.

"Good morning all," said Norman, and strode into the office with a confident tread. Despite the red rims round his eyes – red rims that suggested, laughably, that he might have been wearing huge rubber goggles all night – he looked confident and ready to take on the worst the world could throw at him. Secretaries looked up right and left like predatory cats pricking up their ears in the long grass. This was a new Mr Norman, one who spoke and said Good Morning. Norman flashed a dazzling glance at Estelle Eszterhazy as he passed, and – heaven of heavens! – she flashed one back like a reflection.

He felt terrible.

Although he had slept for twelve hours the night before, he felt as if he had stayed up all night. The headset had left red depressions in his head.

"Good morning Dave," said Norman as he passed Dave Scut's desk. Scut looked up like a pack leader who has just been cuffed awake by a pup. He grunted a reply in gruff confusion.

"What marvellous delights await us this fine morning," said Norman, pulling his wire in-tray across the desk with a scraping sound, tearing it from the four Blu-Tak supports that normally secured it in a position parallel to the desk-mounted nameplate saying NORMAN NORMAN, JUNIOR FINANCE MANAGER. "Whoops! Oh, joy! It's Quarterly Audits AGAIN! Don't you wish you got a chance to do Quarterly Audits, Dave, instead of dudging around town in your big BMW with your

boring old expense account?"

Scut gave him an imperious stare. Elated, Norman rose to his feet. This would liven up the morning. "Don't you find all that and wining and dining secretaries monotonous, Dave? Can you *spell* monotonous?"

Scut blinked. This was not supposed to happen. Aggression in the office was a punch-the-filing-cabinet-once-your-boss-was-out-of-the-room, snigger-just-within-earshot-about-the-precisely-arranged-rows-of-staples-on-Norman's-desk sort of thing. While he was blinking, Norman poked him in the eye. Scut collapsed in dignified silence. While he was doing this, Norman took out the bundle of VAT receipts Scut had placed on his desk on the assumption Norman would magically turn them into expense claim forms, and hit Scut with them side-on to his spine, just under the back of his head. Scut crumpled in manly agony, shaking his head and presenting it as a target. Glee-fully, Norman kicked it. Norman had never been particularly good at football as a boy, and so he kicked Scut's head with the ball of his foot rather than his toe. The effect seemed even more dramatic than it would have been had he kicked correctly. Seeing Scut collapse feebly, covering the tender portions of his body, Norman pulled a telephone off the desk, wound the cable round Scut's neck and started pulling. The effect was not exactly the desired one, since the telephone cable was of the helically-coiled variety, and expanded as he pulled, but Scut began nevertheless to go a satisfying shade of purple, and it was at this point that two of Norman's colleagues pulled him off, keeping their crotches clear of his hands and their hands clear of his teeth. Feeling every inch the bikini-clad barbarian, or some such phrase, Norman rose to his feet, grinning like an elephant's graveyard, and turned. Estelle Eszterhazy, that most fascinating of Credit Control Supervisors, she who never normally looked up at his most hopeful "Good Morning," was sitting staring at him as at something highly fascinating. A highly fascinating poisonous reptile, maybe, rather than a fascinating man; but Scut had been a man, and Norman preferred to be a reptile.

"Norman," she said, and this time Norman knew she meant his first name.

"You'd better have a damned good reason for this, Norman."

This was the last name this time. Norman was almost sure of it.

"I wanted to kill him, sir," said Norman, without hesitation. "I don't know who came over me. Who came over me, geddit, eh, eh, eh?"

Mizz Calladine, Director of Financial Services, stared at him from inside a Laura Ashley suit with shoulders sharp enough to cut chips on.

"I don't expect this sort of behaviour from a Coworker in my Vocational Environment," mumbled Scut through a handkerchief pressed over his eye.

"Neither do I, Dave," said Calladine. "But you know as well as I do that people don't do things like this for no reason, and Norman has a perfectly clean disci-

plinary record. You must have done something to him to provoke such a response, David, don't you agree?"

Norman grinned. It had always, indeed, been his own cherished belief that there were two sides to every argument. The fact that, in this case, there really was only one, did not alter the pious set of his features. Scut opened and closed his mouth as if fel-lating the Invisible Man.

"Hey, he looks like he's fel-lating the Invisible Man," said Norman.

*Top Hole*, thought Norman to himself. *The afternoon off, plus the prospect of never again having to prise myself out of bed and ooze to work in the mornings. The only reason why I go to work, he said to himself, is that work is the only place in the world Mother can't find me.* He saw a small child making faces at him at a bus stop. Norman punched the small child square on the nose with gleeful force. Luckily, the child was able to scuttle away, trailing blood and bogeys, before Norman could inflict more serious injury. A wall of protective grandmothers closed across the pavement with expressions of stern contempt. Norman considered using his metal umbrella to play their heads like a xylophone, but, despairing of their acoustic properties, decided against it.

"You *ignorant* young man," one of them said.

"Piss off! Bald cunt," said Norman, bad words coming to him naturally in a way they had never come before, not even during his Chartered Accountancy examinations. Ha! *This* was the way to live a life. Take what you would, and beat up on the elderly.

Just then, he collided with a real flesh-and-blood perfume-smelling woman. He got a good grab of her slyly before he was bounced back onto the pavement.

"Oh, Norman," said the woman. "I *am* sorry."

It was Estelle Eszterhazy. Clean and fresh as a single passion flower in a field of gilded lilies.

Norman's face broke into a gintrap grin. "Miss Eszterhazy, my sperms would swim a million miles through paraquat to find and fertilize your female form. Bumping into you in the street is a pleasure, as neither swimming nor paraquat are involved."

Miss Eszterhazy looked bewildered. Norman was encouraged. Normally women knew in exactly what category to put him, and bewilderment was a step forward from that.

"Howdjer like yer eggs in the mornin darlin'?" Norman exclaimed, making his point clearer. In order to further elaborate, he clapped one hand to his bicep and hooked the air. "Getcha knickers off."

Miss Eszterhazy backed away in what was evidently becoming real terror.

Norman suddenly felt very tired.

"Oh, Miss Eszterhazy," he said, "I'm very sorry. I really do not know what is happening to me."

He stepped back. And collapsed, very slowly, onto the pavement.

The inside of Estelle Eszterhazy's car was also fresh and clean and perfume-smelling.



"I know there must be something wrong, Norman, otherwise you wouldn't be acting in a manner so unlike you."

Norman had never fallen asleep whilst in the presence of a woman before. It was a terrifying experience, and had happened so quickly he hadn't had time to change. Little cold bubbles of trapped Arctic air rolled upward out of his three-piece like slow hailstones as he sank into the frigid current.

*But aha, Mr Sandman!* he said to himself. *If there's air in my suit, then logically, I must have begun life in the air, and been thrown into the water. And if I was thrown in, there must be a hole up there, in the Impenetrable Ice.*

He had to act fast. he could feel his clothes vanishing away to handkerchief-sized scraps, as if they'd been made of woven sugar crystals. In fact, as he thought the thought, he was sure the salty water around him tasted sweeter...

*Pull yourself together, man.*

Most of the clothes returned, albeit without a few buttons and pockets. He began methodically stripping them off himself and blowing them full of carbon dioxide he didn't need anyway. As he touched his lips to them, he could not help but detect a faint taste of glucose, but he fought down the urge to consume his own trousers, and stolidly inflated them as he had been instructed in Junior Lifesavers.

Above him as he looked up was a vast blue lagoon filled with bobbing chunks of fractured ice, as if he had fallen as a meteor from heaven.

But if so, why had he not torn his suit?

And with that, the lagoon was contracting, contracting like the pupils of an attractive woman smiling at him because she had an Ulterior Motive. The ice was creeping inward, freezing at impossible speed toward that tiny blue-white speck of brightness...

The trouser sugar in the water gave him strength, and he kicked upwards, buoyed up by the balloon he had made of his underthings, but oddly enough, not buoyed down by the absence of the air he had breathed out of his lungs into the bladder. However, he was not complaining. He had to kick upwards, hard, as the ring of ice closed like the iris of a camera, thrust his hand up into the warmth and brightness of the sun...

The ice closed around his hand. But his hand was up there, groping around in the air. And the pores of the skin of his hand were breathing, and whilst they were breathing he knew his lungs would have enough to go on.

He felt an inquiring tentacle coiling round his leg, as if to say, <Ahem> Excuse Me, Aren't You Supposed to Be Being Dragged Back Down Into Your Violent Subconscious?

He drew back his fist, regarded the glistening ice surface with grim satisfaction, and unleashed the Powers of the Orca.

The windscreen shattered. It was an old car. Little bits of blood-flecked Triplex splattered and scattered over every available surface. Estelle Eszterhazy

swerved the car across both lanes of the carriageway.

"NORMAN – WHAT ARE YOU DOING –?"

A Beautiful Butterfly squirming out of a pupa, Norman wriggled through the jagged orifice he had made and flopped out onto the blood-covered bonnet.

"Free! Free at last!" he yelled. "Free to frolic naked through the Winter Wonderland of Double-Entry Bookkeeping!"

He rolled off the car bonnet and collapsed onto the pavement. A lot of his blood came with him; some stayed behind. Passers-by stared at him as though he had just fallen from the Moon, rather than crawled out of the ice, which was *completely* wrong. A young lady bent to help him with blood-lust in her eyes.

"Excuse me, I'm a trained First Aider, would you like me to call you an ambulance?"

"No," said Norman, whimpering, "I'd like you to call me Normous Norman, Nudger of the Nether Navel, and none of you ever do."

The girl recoiled, retracted and retreated. Norman hid his face in his hands.

"Miss Eszterhazy," he said through his hands, "the bond I feel for you must be stronger than those I feel for others, or I would be addressing you, too, with such vile imprecations."

"I'm glad to hear it, Norman," said Miss Eszterhazy. "Are you experiencing any severe headaches, peculiar sounds or smells, or unaccountable abilities to comprehend foreign languages?"

"I have been experimenting with an Auro-Linguistic Programming Dream Device," said Norman, tapping the shiny boss on the left hand side of his head, "and I believe that it is Poisoning My Brain. It won't let me sleep, and keeps waking me up to Control My Own Dreams From Within, and the less it lets me sleep the more I keep trying to fall asleep and the more I fall asleep the more it wakes me, and I've got to get back home, find my ALPDreamer™ Extraction Tool, yank it out of my head and TURN IT OFF NOW, or, or, or—"

*I don't want to spend my whole life underwater.*

He looked up with a face covered in drying blood in which little flecks of glass were embedded at Estelle Eszterhazy.

The car radio insisted in the background: "THE US SUBMARINE 'TOADFISH,' THE MOST POWERFUL WEAPON EVER TO GLIDE MENACINGLY BENEATH THE CRYSTAL SEAS, WAS YESTERDAY FORCE TO ENLARGE THE HOLE IT HAD RUTHLESSLY BATTERED IN THE ARCTIC ICE. CAPTAIN SPUNKMEYER WITHDREW THE SUBMARINE'S MASSIVE TITANIUM FIN IN A VIOLENT CRASH DIVE, THEN BLEW HIS TANKS AGAIN AND AGAIN AND AGAIN, DRIVING THE FIN UP AND DOWN AGAINST THE VIRGIN ICE, POUNDING, BATTERING –"

– he was hanging in midwater, and the Thing was stirring in the murk below him, but there was another sound now, a loud sound, a cetacean, mammalian sound, a sound that took cephalopods and fried their highly advanced nervous systems to *calamari* in the briny deep...

Sonar.

He didn't so much hear it as *feel* it in his every strictly natural fibre, and the fact that he heard it meant that a Sonar Operator knew his position, and the sea was streaming over him as if running from the passage of Something Truly Huge. Slowly, inevitably, the great dark shadow grew in the blue depths and the powerful, inexorable Fin drove upward through the limply yielding water until CLANK, CLANK his steel-segged boots hit its metal surface and he was now the Vanguard of the Fin, the cutting edge of several thousand tonnes of rising American technology.

The ice parted over his head like cellophane. Not being able to breathe through cellophane, he tore it away. The Fin rose powerful, erect and triumphant above Arctic ice that was clean and fresh as a Christmas shop display, complete with robotic penguins. The Robotic Penguins saw him, stood to attention and saluted.

He stepped down off the fin, onto the polystyrene ice. Even the fin itself had become tiny in comparison with his bronzed colossal form; the Sun itself was a tiny pawnbroker's ball in the sky, just waiting for him to reach up and redeem it. He had only to reach up and close his hand, and the world itself would darken...

"Come along, Norman. We're late for Dragging You to the Bottomless Depths of the Frigid Ocean where I shall Throttle The Life Out Of You With My Wetly Clinging Suckers."

There was somebody here, in his private dream which only he directed! He turned to see the Cephalopod, not nearly as universally huge as he remembered, having heaved itself up onto dry land, ungainly as a seal, stinking of Rive Gauche and ammonia. The creature's face was clearly visible inside a medusoid ring of tentacles. It held few surprises for him, except for the fact that it was wearing a twinset and pearls just short of its tentacle frill, and horn-rimmed glasses over its huge dinnerplate eyes. Two of its tentacles were knitting, and one was operating a television remote control.

"Oh well," said the creature, "I suppose I shall just have to sink down into the cold dark without so much as a drowning mariner to keep me company. Don't mind me. I won't make a fuss."

The scent of ammonia from the creature's loathsome shortbread-tartan hide was overpowering. Norman felt himself overcome by the fumes, and drifted into black consciousness.

Somebody was waving a bottle of smelling salts under his nose.

"HE'S COMIN' ROUND! HE'S COMIN' ROUND!"

"LET ME AT THE BARSTED!"

"HE PUNCHED OUR KEANU IN THE NOSE!"

"HE CALLED MY GIRLFRIEND A HIGHLY ATTRACTIVE WOMAN!"

Norman was not quite sure he remembered the red-faced man with the large fists, or his highly attractive girlfriend. This must have been something he had done whilst under the influence of conscious thought.

"I'll take the whole lot of you Roughly From Behind," he mumbled spiritedly.

"Into the car, Norman," came a voice which sounded like Estelle Eszterhazy's. He heard the sound of impatient fists banging on what didn't sound like his own skin, rather like car wings and windows. He felt himself being pushed onto imitation leather and moved forward at a speed faster than a lot of people shouting very loud could run.

It was comfy on the back seat, and Norman felt himself sliding into a proudly erect posture, standing tall and cold on the ice plain, so straight and tall and cold that he could see the curve of the horizon, the world itself bending to the size of his expanding will...

"Don't go to sleep, Norman!" SLAP. A giant hand descended from heaven. "You must stay awake!"

"AARGH! Don't hurt me, mistress!"

The car was cold and bright, light and air alike streaming in through the absence of windscreen. It was very difficult to get to sleep.

"Imagine it's Christmas, Norman! Imagine you're five years old and it's Christmas and you've built a Santa Trap at the bottom of the chimney and are waiting for the big fat bastard to step into a mass of mousetraps! How can you sleep, Norman? You've got to wait to see if he's true!"

It had never occurred to Norman that anyone might build a Santa Trap. "Miss Eszterhazy," he proclaimed solemnly, "I love you deeply for reasons I do not fully understand."

"What is this card, Norman? This card in your pocket? It says 'CLICK YOUR FINGERS IN FRONT OF MY FACE NOW.'"

There was a sharp finger-clicking sound.

"Hello," said Norman suddenly. "My name is Norman Norman, and I am Mad. This is an ALPDreamer™ Superego Suppression Emergency. Please telephone the ALPDreamer™ Corporation on Freefone 235971 and quote my Cortex ID. Hurry, or I may begin to foam at the mouth and Swallow My Own Tongue." The message ended, and his eyes glazed over again.

Miss Esterhazy and the world were growing smaller, rounder, like a tiny ball on which the balls of his feet were balancing. He could feel himself mutually orbiting round the world. He could feel smaller celestial bodies diverting their courses to move closer to his waxing magnificence. Closer and closer they streamed, like shadows round a streetlight in the snow, and snowballs many of them were, dirty snowballs, comets, the lesser masses of the solar system first, fizzling into cooling rain as they impacted on his red-hot skin. Then followed siderites and chondrites and aerolites, a rain of meteors that burnt up in the boundary layer of air trapped close to his skin by his healthy head of hair. Then came the planets, squishy balls of hydrogen for the most part, bursting against his body like overinflated beach balls, their frail gravities not able to hold their atmospheres together. Last of all came the Sun, a fiery flaming ball of helium, which he opened his mouth to swallow, breathing fire in a squeaky voice for quite some time thereafter. Other stars were smaller, like bioluminescent plankton streaming into the mouth of a baleen

whale, and galaxies finally began to whirl around his head like returning boomerangs, in preparation for the Big-Bang-in-Reverse.

*Their quarks and mine once inhabited the same cubic inch of space. Now we are to be reunited at last...*

"NORMAN NORMAN, YOU BAD BOY. WHAT HAVE YOU DONE IN YOUR JIM-JAMS? HEY, NORMAL! NORMAL NORMAN! NORMAN NORMAL! GET HIS KEX OFF! SHOW ALL THE GIRLS HIS TINY WILLY!"

"DO YOU WANT THE UMBILICAL CUTTING NOW, MRS NORMAN?"

Something spanked Norman hard on the bottom, and a bright light shone in his eyes. Norman screamed.

"Hello, Norman."

Norman opened his eyes. A dashing handsome man was sitting on the bed in front of him.

"You've been a very poorly boy, Norman," said the man. "I am a representative of the ALPDreamer<sup>TM</sup> Corporation, a subsidiary of Pyramid Products, and I would like to *personally* apologize for the regrettable near-death experience you have recently undergone."

Norman stared back with eyes wider than his own head.

"As part of the package for purchasing your ALPDreamer<sup>TM</sup>, we have a remote support contract for your personality. It is unfortunate that a mathematically infinitesimal portion of the population exhibit violent solipsistic reactions to Auro-Linguistic Stimulus, but it is a sad fact of life for which we legally must be ready. As soon as your friend Miss Eszterhazy contacted us, we were able to dial into your Dreamer and resuppress your Id with intolerant outpourings from your Superego. Luckily you appear to have wet yourself a great number of times in your childhood, up to the age 18, and you also appear convinced even to this day that you possess a penis of inadequate dimensions. We were able to use the deep-seated embarrassment stored in all these memories to bring you back to the semblance of the man you were."

An attractive nurse standing next to the bed smirked. The handsome man beamed back at her like a brilliantined Apollo. Norman groaned.

"Were it not for the prompt actions of your friend Miss Eszterhazy, you would very probably not be alive today," said the brylcreamed creature. "She is a most remarkable person, and it is the very least I can do in the circumstances to offer her dinner tonight with me, on my company." He flashed a smile like a piano keyboard. Norman switched his gaze across the bed. Miss Eszterhazy, who was standing on the other side of the bed, was blushing bashfully and smiling at the wavy-haired wonder in a simpering manner Norman recognized only too downheartedly.

"Hello, Norman," said another apparition at the foot of the bed. Now Norman knew himself to be dreaming for certain. Hythe waved what appeared to be a pair of tickets in his face. "Well done, old thing. You were Worldwide ALPDreamer<sup>TM</sup> Customer One Million, and I sold you! This week my commission will include a

Ferrari Benito in Italian Racing Red and two free tickets to French Guiana. Return of course." And now it was not just the Chinful Wonder, but Hythe, too, who was grinning at Miss Eszterhazy. "Might even be able to get some lucky lady to accompany me."

The craggy-jawed sex god pushed a form and a highly expensive fountain pen over the bedsheets. "Now there's just the small matter of this waiver of liability to my company. I am afraid we must refuse to offer you Auro-Linguistic Services in the future. As you can see, we have paid for your medical care quite handsomely." He laughed, and Norman examined the trees outside the window for birds falling charmed from their branches. "You wouldn't get care like *this* on the National Health, believe me."

Norman nodded. He tucked his tongue into the corner of his mouth, and picked up the pen. "Where do I sign?" he said. He signed where the man put his finger.

"Your mother's waiting outside," said the handsome man.

Norman nodded.

"Of course she is," he said.

He eyed the window to his left again. He was in a normal hospital; the window appeared to have no bars, and it was a gentle drop to the ground outside. His clothes were also visible in the wardrobe to his right.

The old woman had not put up a fight once she had seen the Pipe-Bender. Norman had acquired it from a hardware stockists' as the largest piece of hand-held iron in the shop. He was not quite sure what he would employ it for, if he actually needed to employ it, but so far, running up to old ladies and hissing "Gimme All Yer Money, Old Lady, or I'll *Bend* Yer" had seemed to work. He had a suspicion that old ladies would give up all their money if a mugger waved a blanchmange at them. On the downside, old ladies were not rolling in cash, but on the table in front of him wrapped up in a paisley headscarf he still had enough for his latest fix.

"I'd make more money if I boiled down their backsides and sold them for glue," he said to himself, observing the plump *derrières* of aged matrons wobbling past the café window with the eye of an entrepreneur. The espresso shook as he held it in his fingerless-gloved hands. The owner of the Empty Temple Café was known to cut the espresso with Horlicks for ALPine customers who were too far gone to tell the difference.

"Another," said Norman to the waitress.

"You've had seven of those already," said the waitress.

"Need to stay awake," said Norman. "I'm a, I'm a, I'm a Taxi Driver." He moved his leg furtively to conceal the pipe-bender. He felt his head loll and expand to fill the entire universe, then shook himself angrily awake.

The waitress slapped another espresso down on the table in front of him. Norman eyed it greedily, and, pulling out a pack of Pro-Plus from his suit pocket, crumbled up half the packet into the coffee before raising it to his lips. It tasted heavenly, stuffed heavy as a river was laden with silt with enough caffeine to mutate small insects and make one great cancer of his mouth. It



shocked him awake like sex with a light socket.

The bell on the door rang, and the Man was entering the shop, the flex of the Appliance dangling from his real badger fur coat. Mr Wheeler, the Electrical Dealer. The patrons of the café looked up like starving sharks at the legs of a swimmer, but Mr Wheeler pushed through the tables over to the one person present who had money to pay for his jolt.

"You got the money?"

Norman handed him the headscarf. He opened it, and Wheeler appraised the money, apparently by testing the weight of the whole bundle in his hand rather than counting each piece individually.

"You got the gear?"

Mr Wheeler slapped the flex into one of the row of sockets that just happened to occupy the wall, and slid the leads of his Appliance into the empty aperture in Norman's furtively bowed forehead.

"Oooaargh, Mother Squid, Get Thee Hence From My Ice Floe!" he shrieked. The other patrons, accustomed to such imprecations, turned back to their espressos, unwilling to attack Wheeler for his Device due to the big knife Wheeler always carried in his badgerskin sleeve. Wheeler jerked the Device off Norman's temples, and Norman followed after it whimpering like a small dog whose food bowl has been whisked away.

Wheeler rose, and was gone with the fair weather.

Norman rose, chugged a packet of Pro-Plus from another pocket, and picked up the pipe-bender, cunningly concealed in a length of brown paper. There was no time to waste. He was five Someone Else's Grandmas away from his next fix.

On the end of the street that led to the Women's Institute Beetle Drive and Iron Fist Self Defence Collective, however, he stopped and did several takes.

There was a car parked on the corner. A car that should not have been there. Surely its owner knew better than to park a fully-dressed Ferrari Benito in Dreaming Spires. The only thing saving the car from having its hubcaps summarily stolen was the fact that the wheels were hubless. Furthermore, the idiot had been suicidal enough to wind his windows down and sit there sleeping in the sunshine.

And he was wearing something in his left temple. Not a scratty old Model Three something covered in worn leatherette, like Wheeler's, but a shiny Model Eight with real gold electrodes.

Norman pinched himself on the correct assumption that he was dreaming, but when he snapped back into wakefulness the Model Eight, car and driver were still there. Norman knew he would do terrible things for the thing the wealthy gentleman had slotted into his temporal lobes. Old Eli, who had shouted "You're Not Goin to Eat ME, Uncle Ernie" every time Wheeler had plugged him into the mains, had got hold of a Model Five after ram-raiding a mental-health store with a purloined ice-cream van. The police had found him days later, a persistent vegetable, mind munched by Solipsism Psychosis, after the neighbours had complained about the smell of urine and vanilla. SP was what got

them all in the end, Norman knew. Neuropsychologists said ALPiners were the successful ones, the ones who adapted to Auro-Linguistic Programming the best and made their dreams better than any grey reality could ever be – so much better that their minds started trying to make them dream all the time they were asleep and sleep all the while they were awake. Norman had seen TV programmes on the hostel television.

*Don't ever give a human being a chance to control his dreams. Might as well give a tiger all the meat it can eat.*

The car driver's face looked strangely familiar. His hair looked even more familiar. Norman was vaguely aware that he had seen the hair before, separate from its owner, hanging on a hook in an Executive Washroom, whilst the owner watched himself practising Brazilian Capoeira moves in the wall mirror. Norman looked at the driver with the insane jealousy of a Dreamer looking at a man who, due to a slight variation in the structure of his neocortex, could don an Appliance legally as many times a day as he desired. As the driver shifted in his sleep with the ecstatic expression of an ALPine scoring ten seconds of REM, he murmured something.

The something was, "Oh, Estelle."

Norman took up the pipe-bender, and suddenly realized he knew exactly how to employ it.

The gentleman slumped in the seat with a blissful smile on his face. There was not even any blood on the upholstery. Norman ignored the car keys and snatched up the Model Eight. Then, with a self control that would not have been possible had he not known where his next dream was coming from, he laid down the Model Eight and took up the car keys.

The car handled beautifully, which was just as well, for he was falling asleep at the wheel. Luckily the darning needles he'd pushed into his buttocks that morning were keeping him up every time he sat down.

*I've just killed someone oh God I've just killed someone I'm going out just like Eli they're going to find me dead in a pool of my favourite flavour...*

He pulled up across a polar landscape in front of a huge igloo with second hand cars parked outside it. A robotic penguin in a shell suit waved to him as the Ferrari's brakes stopped it faster than crashing into a brick wall would have done.

He leapt out of the car and pinched himself awake. He pointed at the car.

"Stolen car! It's a stolen car!"

The penguin, whom Norman knew to be one of the least scrupulous penguins in the entire North Pole, shifted a cigar out of its mouth into its gold-ringed fingers, and said "So?"

"I want £399.99 for it," said Norman. "Up front," he added mistrustfully.

The penguin smiled. It gestured to an animatronic polar bear, which ran into the igloo. There was the ring of a cash till. The polar bear looked at Norman with suspicion as he returned with a wad of Bank of Greenland pound notes.



"He could be a front for the Filth," said the polar bear.

"Not bloody likely. His eyes are moving rapid as a rutting rabbit. Norman lives in the Frozen North. You probably think I'm a King Penguin, don't you, Norman?"

"Don't be ridiculous," said Norman to the penguin. "King Penguins don't have your resplendent yellow breast plumage."

Norman felt himself striding across the landscape like a god, and slapped the side of his head. The penguin became uglier and less ornithoid.

"I could take the car *and* the money," said the Penguin, as if this were a concept he'd only just thought of.

Norman shook his head "Nah." He did not look up from counting the money.

The Penguin backed off. Never stand between spike and vein.

"NEW!" proclaimed the shop window display. "FRESH FROM BIG SLEEP PRODUCTS! TESTED ON HUMANS!"

Norman was pleased. All the very safest latest products proudly announced a pedigree of being Tested on Humans. After animals had been taken out of the equation, Iraqi civilians were the next best thing. In many a Middle Eastern country, the chemical warfare and cosmetics industries alike had been boosted sevenfold on the day the European Union's laboratory beagles had been killed humanely whilst being denied a last cigarette. Tested on Humans meant the product nestling shiny under the jeweller's lights and iridescent mirrors was safe for Norman Norman.

The assistant behind the counter regarded Norman's newspaper-stuffed combat jacket distastefully.

"Are you interested in any of our products, sir?"

"I want that one," said Norman, licking his lips as he pointed at the shiny device, and trying frantically to keep his wavering finger away from a line of Model Ten ALPDreamers which were, for some reason, in the same window display.

"The Big Sleep XV9000? That particular model costs 399.99. How does sir wish to pay?" said the assistant, in a tone of voice which implied the continuation: *In used, syphilitic dog-ends, perhaps?*

"You leave me alone. I used to be somebody," said Norman, "though I'm damned if I can remember who. I wish to pay in money. How rapidly does it induce sleep?"

"This particular model is in use by the Former Soviet Armed Forces. It is designed to be parachute-dropped from a height of over a thousand metres, and to withstand pressures of a thousand atmospheres. It screws neatly into a hole it creates by painlessly burrowing into your right temple, and will provide the equivalent of a night's sleep in under five minutes. There are psychotic side effects I really should warn you about –"

"How rapidly does it induce sleep?"

"I really don't know," said the assistant. "It comes in a variety of colours. Winter camouflage, summer camouflage, and desert camouflage."

"Put it on," said Norman.

"Aha," said the assistant, "but if I put it on, what's to stop you from tying me up and making off with the

contents of my till?"

"What a fertile imagination you possess," said Norman, clandestinely returning the cosh and duct tape to his back pocket. "I'll take it."

The roof of the abandoned railway tunnel sweated cold water, like a man awaking from a nightmare.

It was terrible working with the two devices, like being a cocaine addict entrusted by crime bosses with the crack-making process. Only the uncertain knowledge that he was working towards a greater high prevented him from grabbing the Model Eight, jamming it into the blank housing in his left temple, and not waking up until his head filled the universe and galaxies were streaming from his ears.

Norman took the limp but (he had discovered to his relief) not quite yet dead body of Hythe, and, sitting it in a chair which he had made of half bricks and orange crates, connected it up to the innards of the Big Sleep XV9000, which he had dismembered with the care of a surgeon performing cardiac bypass on a baby. The XV9000, he was delighted to discover, operated on a similar principle to the Model Seven ALPDreamers with whose internal workings he was painfully familiar; two electrodes entered the sleep centres of the brain, one to stimulate, and the other to collect feedback data. All ALPDreamers, he knew, activated as soon as REM sleep twitches were detected by the ocular electrodes. *There must be a delay, though, however slight, between falling asleep and beginning to dream. If I can only cause the ALPDreamer to detect a breakup of alpha and beta waves in the cerebral cortex rather than REM twitches, and cause it to send its activation signal through the Big Sleep thingy rather than its own electrodes, I can get some sleep. I'll stop the spiral. I'll stop being so tired that I drop off and have it wake me up again every few seconds once I start to dream, because those few seconds of sleep before I start to dream'll be Concentrated Electrical Sleep.*

*(Do you dream in Concentrated Electrical Sleep? Nah. Bound not to.)*

*(But what if you dream Concentrated Electrical Dreams?)*

*All I need is specialized equipment for measuring brain activity only available only in hospitals. And the training to use it, of course. And far more micro-electronic savvy than I currently possess. And tools, lots of tools. And a brain that's working fine at the moment. And...*

*Still, let's have a look inside this bugger.*

He opened up the casing of the Model Eight. And gasped, and gawped, and gaped.

The Model Eight had four electrodes. Half its internal workings were identical to those of a Model Seven. The other half were identical to the insides of the Big Sleep XV9000. Norman picked up the XV9000 and held it close to the ALPDreamer™. The two matched closely, even down to what was written beneath BIG SLEEP™ INTERNATIONAL and ALPDREAMER™ CORPORATION, which both proudly announced themselves to be A PYRAMID PRODUCTS COMPANY.

The building was an unassuming cuboid of steel and glass. Pyramid Products did not even have the chic to house their activities inside a pyramidal building. Norman was unsurprised. There was a blowsy plastic replica of the Great Pyramid of Cheops in the reception area, but any fool could see that its soul cannon was not aligned towards Orion.

The receptionist wore a Model Eight in her left temple, and was happy, immaculately-groomed and well-adjusted. Norman adjusted her a little more with the instrument he'd brought with him. She slumped back in her chair, closed and flickered her eyelids, and began moaning "aargh, aargh, there's a Man in the house."

Norman leaned over the desk and inspected the building floorplan on the forbidden side of the desk, putting the pipe-bender down as he did so.

"What are you going to do with that?" said the receptionist, her eyes still closed. "Don't you *dare* put that thing in me."

Norman entered the elevator, taking a few practice bends at the air with his weapon.

"Daddy!," moaned the receptionist to a customer who had just entered the lobby, "*it's you!*"

The tenth floor, like the reception hall, was floored with white varicose-veined marble. Norman strode into the office he had located to be confronted by more marble and an unpleasant surprise.

"Estelle?"

He was relieved to note that the name on the triangular prism on the desk still read E. ESZTERHAZY, rather than E. ANYTHING-ELSE.

She was wearing a Model Eight. Her taste in clothes had not changed, apart from a name badge and – horror of horrors! – an engagement ring. Whilst her horror at the change in his own taste in clothes was still in force, he took her hand and stared at the huge, diamond-laden thing, oddly proud of the fact that he wasn't appraising its value according to the number of street hits he could get out of it.

"Is it real silver?" said Norman sadly.

"It's real plutonium, chased with lead, titanium and silver," came a voice from the other side of the room. "That ring, melted down, could provide heat and lighting to a electrically frugal city for a week. Who are you anyway? Are you a contractor? The internal plumbing is down the hall."

The Handsome Man was even more handsome than ever. His shoulders were as square as the set of his jaw. Norman was half in love with him himself. How would it ever be possible to bash the brains out of anything so beautiful?

"You only distribute Model Eights to members of your own staff," said Norman. "I checked."

The Handsome Man nodded to Estelle, who nodded back. She began to dial a number on her handset. Norman did not attempt to stop her.

"The Model Eight is still in a trial stage," said the Handsome Man easily. His easy mood vanished when

he saw that Miss Eszterhazy was having difficulty obtaining the number she desired.

"I disconnected your telephone via the central switchboard, which is located in reception," said Norman. "On my way in here. As I am sure you are aware, the Model Eight possesses a Big Sleep intensive sleep circuit. I have examined the inside of a Model Five, a Model Six, and a Model Seven. They all have room for such a circuit. I can only assume that whilst these models were 'in a trial stage,' they all also possessed Big Sleep circuits which were later removed when the models went to production. Furthermore, since wearing a Model Eight, I have become entirely unaffected by the evils of Solipsism Psychosis, which you informed me personally would occur inevitably every time I donned a Dreamer in future. Why?"

The Handsome Man seated himself on his desk. He smiled. "Norman, Norman, Norman. Sit down."

Norman preferred to stand.

"Would you care for a coffee? I'm sure Estelle can get us one."

"Estelle can also get us a security guard. But I don't mind if she does. Your security guards will be powerless against my Massive Technological Superiority."

The Handsome Man's eyebrow raised a fraction. "Which is?"

"I have," said Norman, removing the instrument of doom from his inside coat pocket, "a Mobile Phone."

The Handsome Man laughed. It was the sort of loud laughter that interrupts conversations with one's intended in expensive restaurants. He also had the bad taste to slap his thighs.

"Hahahahahahaha! I thought you were serious there for a moment, Norm! Good to see you again! What can we get you – Earl Grey, Blue Mountain, Uganda Robusta?"

Two security guards entered. These were not the common ageing greying ex-police security guards with whom Norman was familiar. They were large, and wide, and stern of countenance.

The Handsome Man's happy face turned upside down. He nodded to a security guard. "Take this Dream Junkie out and show him the door. The lift shaft door on the tenth floor, to be precise, and the floor beneath it."

Hands in pockets, Norman did not resist.

"No –!" said Estelle Eszterhazy. Her hand moved to the drawer of her desk.

Norman looked into her eyes, and saw beautiful blue water with something dark rushing up fast towards the surface.

"Yes, we could have put Big Sleep circuits into every fucking unit we manufactured," said the Handsome Man. "It would have put up the cost to £699.98, all for saving the marbles of a vanishingly tiny percentage of genetic losers like yourself. Would you have paid that? Of course you wouldn't –"

Norman remembered the dreams, and the lonely, claustrophobic bedroom. "I'd have paid *anything*," he

murmured.

“— besides, with Big Sleeps put in, we’d have missed out on massive opportunities in After Sales Support,” grinned the Handsome Man. He pressed another button on his desk, next door to the security-guard-summoning button which he’d sat on deliberately. “Security, please send in Mr Wheeler.”

Norman blinked in horror as the door to the corridor opened, and a familiar figure in real badger fur walked in. He smiled and tipped his genuine rhinoceros hat at Norman.

“Don’t think for a moment that you’re the first would-be Junkie assassin who’s wandered in here,” continued the Handsome Man. “And don’t think for a moment that your death will be investigated with any great thoroughness by the police. Everybody knows that Dream Junkies jump down elevator shafts without outside assistance.”

Norman nodded, as if he had known all along. Maybe he had.

He pressed the autodial on the mobile telephone in his coat pocket.

The Handsome Man collapsed gurgling, as did the Security Guards, Mr Wheeler, and Estelle Eszterhazy. Norman pounced on Estelle Eszterhazy and was beneath her before she hit the ground. He gently removed the Model Eight from her left temple using a home-made extraction tool.

She opened eyes that were impossibly lovely, uncreatable by the lesser God who had made this horrid world. “Norman?”

“Help, no, the spiders,” said the Handsome Man.

“It’s going to be perfectly all right now,” said Norman.

“You’re not doing handsprings on *my* garden, Yuri Gagarin” said Mr Wheeler.

Norman held up the remote control. “It operates on the same frequency as the Model Eight. It turns the electrosleep circuit on full blast. At the moment, they’re receiving a full night’s sleep every ten seconds, along with a full night’s dreaming. They’ll go blind from rapid eye movement. Their eye muscles will tear their eyeballs loose from their heads. I’ve Experimented On Rats,” he confided. Then, he hung his head. “Of course, I forget that I am talking about the man who is your intended lifetime mate.”

“Oh, Norman,” said Estelle Eszterhazy, “I only allowed Wansdyke to place his strong masculine hands on me whilst I plotted to Bust His Cap with a Piece.” Shyly, she opened the desk drawer and showed Norman the automatic rifle that lay within. “Having learned to dismantle military firearms when I served as a paratrooper in the Israeli Army, I was smuggling in parts day by day. Today,” she said, bending to her garter belt, and fishing out a small object with modest pride, “I brought in the Firing Pin.”

It could have been the spring assembly from a biro for all Norman knew, but he nodded in absolute credence. Was this, after all, not the woman who had successfully carried out a Year End Rollover on Fixed Assets when battle-balded Internal Auditors had run in hair-free fear?

“Miss Eszterhazy, you are as venomous as you are beautiful.”

Miss Eszterhazy blushed at Norman’s praise of her homicidal capabilities, and slapped the part into the weapon without looking at it. “I could not bear what Wansdyke and his associates did to you. By procuring your own vengeance you have saved me a Lifetime in Stir. But you are sure to suffer in my place. The Law will come after you, Norman.”

Norman tucked the remote control back into his pocket and shook his head. “No. They’re only Dream Junkies. Everyone knows that Dream Junkies blink their own eyeballs out of their sockets without outside assistance. Cover us against police markspersons while we walk to the car, my sweet.”

Miss Eszterhazy hefted the petite, lady-sized weapon. “I will write ESTELLE FOR NORMAN across their flak jackets in blood, my darling.”

*All this seems too perfect. Am I still asleep? Am I a butterfly dreaming he is the Emperor of China?*

As they left the building, Norman felt squid-arms close around his heart as he was confronted by a procession of 30-foot high penguins marching in military formation. Then his face broke into more pearly white enamel than a bathroom fittings showroom as he realized the birds were merely images on a billboard advertising a popular brand of chocolatey biscuity snack.

“Penguin-Free Zone!” he growled triumphantly.

There was a policeman under the billboard, an old-time bobby just walking along his beat without riot gear or light artillery support. He nodded cheerily at Estelle Eszterhazy’s weapon. “Don’t be shooting anyone with that, now,” he said jocularly.

“Realistic, isn’t it?” said Norman. “I’ll have to tell the kids not to hold up any banks with it.”

“Yes,” said Miss Eszterhazy. “Or someone might actually give them money.”

Giggling more heartily than the policeman seemed entirely comfortable with, they climbed into the unremarkable white car Norman had purchased earlier that day at an unremarkable car dealership. So run-of-the-mill was the car that Norman was not entirely sure he could remember what make of car it was.

Hythe, in the rear seat, gurgled at them happily.

“Oh dear,” said Miss Eszterhazy. “Look at poor Mr Hythe. Are you sure that it was entirely necessary to reduce all of them to such an eyeless gibbering condition?”

Driving the car with difficulty with arms bruised from repeated pinch wounds, Norman looked back at the receding building, and shuddered.

“They made my dreams come true.”

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**Dominic Green**, after some time out, has resurfaced – living quietly in the fair Midland city of Northampton. His last story here, “That Thing Over There” (IZ 132), has recently been taken by American editor David Hartwell for reprinting in his best-of-the-year anthology (HarperPrism).

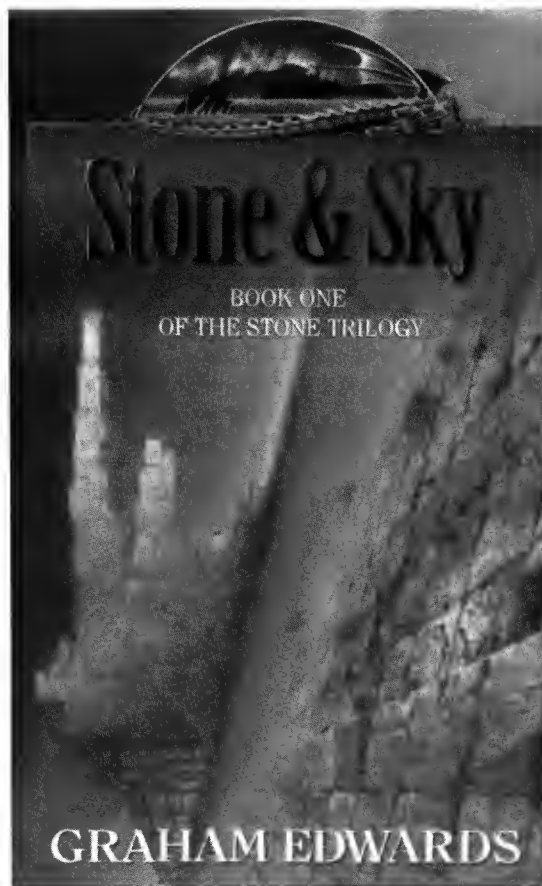
It's a truism that a thriller should start with a bang, and the explosion of Krakatoa in 1883, which opens Graham Edwards's *Stone and Sky* (Voyager, £5.99) is surely a big enough bang for anyone. It propels into a parallel dimension Jonah, a virginal young Victorian scientist; Annie, a dirt-poor Kansas farm-girl fleeing an abusive husband; and Archan, the spirit of an immortal dragon with sinister and voracious ambitions.

The world of *Stone*, where they find themselves, is not at all the usual sort of world, being reminiscent of Philip José Farmer's *World of Tiers*, though it has no tiers as such; it consists wholly of the vertical area between, with its sloping paths and ledges in various sizes. It is, moreover, saturated with magic: all languages are automatically translated; the air provides both nourishment and largely effective (but not always welcome) contraception; one of its spatial dimensions is also a temporal dimension; and there are two different sorts of facilities for reliving stored memories, of which one can also be used for time-travel. Its inhabitants include: more dragons; a range of variously intelligent creatures exuded directly by the rock; the ghosts of the basilisk guardians who used to run the place but have renounced their immortality though they can never truly die; fairies; and the descendants of sundry people who have been from time to time propelled there, mainly by volcanoes.

To make a coherent tale out of so many and diverse ingredients is no small challenge, and it rapidly becomes apparent that Edwards has bitten off more than he can chew, the more so as neither human character has any plan of action and the nature of Archan's malevolence is not immediately apparent. To add to the general confusion, two iterative images dog Jonah and Annie: the red dragon symbol from a mah-jongg tile, and Rapunzel's hair. The significance of neither is explained, but may be in the promised sequels – as may the identity and intentions of whoever built the whole shooting-match, which is generally agreed to be artificial. Meanwhile, this book reaches a reasonably satisfactory conclusion with plenty of action on the way, but I have to confess I found it heavy going.

Jonah is not an especially interesting or likeable character, and though Edwards proclaims that there's strong sexual tension between him and Annie, I couldn't believe in it. He finds her immodestly embarrassing and makes no

attempt to respond to her heavy-handed essays at flirtation, for which he can hardly be blamed; but when a neolithic gentleman pays court to her by the decent and time-honoured method of chatting-up, he gets uptight and thumps him. Too much, and not redeemed by the writing,



## Big Bang

Chris Gilmore

## BOOKS



## REVIEWED

which is what one might expect from a brightish 14-year-old who has learnt how to use big words correctly and may someday learn to use them appropriately, but meanwhile produces this sort of thing:

He was falling free amid a cloud of debris towards a smooth grey monolith jutting out from *Stone* like a plank from a pirate's ship. Except this plank just grew and grew, filling his vision as it eclipsed the sky beneath it until it had assumed gargantuan proportions.

Altogether, a failure, but an honourable failure, by a writer who might have succeeded better on a smaller, less crowded canvas.

Helmut Krausser has chosen a much smaller canvas for his witty *The Great Bagarozy* (Dedalus, £7.99), excellently translated by Mike Mitchell.

Cora is a psychoanalyst who combines little interest in the practice of her profession with none in its ethics, or her dull marriage to Robert, a tax-consultant whose principal diversion in life is his collection of newspaper clippings about bizarre deaths. Naggingly aware that she will soon be 40, Cora is ripe for mischief, and mischief duly arrives in the form of Stanislaus, a handsome if rather raddled-looking patient who announces early on that he is actually the Devil, and is suffering from an obsessional neurosis focused on Maria Callas. Not that it began after her death – far from it; during





her lifetime he had frequently taken over the body of her black poodle, in order to be near to her. An unlikely claim; yet Stanislaus appears to have certain powers above the ordinary, principally in the field of knowing what is supposed to be secret. Yet again, he has worked as both a detective and a stage magician; perhaps he is just a skilled professional.

The novel is written almost entirely from Cora's viewpoint, and Cora's principal ambition from fairly early on is to get Stanislaus into bed – an ambition of which he is fully aware, but persistently refuses to gratify. Consequently very little actually happens, even though Cora's moral standards plummet from their never very elevated apogee in pursuit of him – the natural effect, one might opine, of associating with the Prince of Darkness.

I don't intend to give away the ending, and in any case the book is principally enjoyable for its ornamentation. Krausser has many fine touches of his own, including a post-modernist sculptor who coyly proclaims to be concerned only with sex, admiration and money, regarding everything else as "dangerous nonsense." He also includes a number of choice clippings from Robert's collection for which he acknowledges no source but which I think must be genuine, as one gave me a strong sense of *déjà vu*. You don't get a lot of book for your buck, but this one is worth a second reading.

**S**tories about gruesome serial killings are ten-a-penny these days; stories about people who relive past lives go back at least as far as Dion Fortune, and got a big boost from the publication *The Bloxham Tapes*. In *The Infernal* (Orion/Oriel, £6.99) Kim Wilkins has combined the two, and thrown in for good measure two love triangles, four centuries apart; the efforts of a young woman to throw off the yoke of her repressive mother and find true happiness with a middle-aged accountant; similar efforts on the part of a young man; and some process writing about the hard days and harder nights of an Australian hard rock band on the edge of stardom.

For the writer the danger of this approach is that if some elements are handled conspicuously less well than others, the book as a whole will suffer; for the reader (and the reviewer) the danger is that some aspects will arouse more interest than others. My own interest in the serial killings was tepid; the flips back to the life of a witch in Jacobean England enthralled me; I liked both the love stories, it

being Wilkins's rare gift to write sex scenes which are neither juvenile, clinical nor gross; and as for the rock band – nothing I read was inconsistent with what I had read before in Iain Banks's *Espedair Street*. Others will have other priorities.

Lisa Sheehan, the first-person viewpoint, is an engaging if somewhat unlikely heroine for such a milieu, in that she's a vegetarian teetotaler who does no drugs (not even nicotine or caffeine) nor even very much sex. By way of excitement she likes to dive into the tight-packed revellers during her gigs, there to be man-handled by such of the spaced-out throng who may feel like a grope. Such a lifestyle entails obvious risks, but her troubles only really begin when she tries some DIY regression therapy to cure herself of a persistent nightmare. It's at much the same time that two fans of her band (not known to her personally) are found dead in the woods with various parts missing, her newly married best female friend disappears in suspicious circumstances, she acquires a new boyfriend whose born-again parents look askance at her, and her band gets a recording contract.

Wilkins takes her time, allowing the various elements to slot together, but her finest concept is the villain, a Jacobean warlock who truly lives by Aleister Crowley's dictum: "Do what thou wilt shall be the whole of the Law." Moreover, his magic works, making him a formidable opponent in both lifetimes.

Altogether, a superior and original first novel, though I was slightly disappointed that Wilkins made no effort to render the Jacobean narrative and dialogue in appropriate pastiche. Of course, to try and make a hash of it would be much worse – know your limitations! But they're no less limiting for being known.

**H**eroic fantasy concerns war by definition, so sooner or later someone was bound to transpose Vietnam into a fantasy milieu. As John Marco's *The Jackal of Nar* (Orion, £17.99) opens Prince Richius is in command of a troop of invaders. Cut off from base, he is attempting to hold a weak but strategically vital position in a cause for which he has no real enthusiasm against the Drol, who offset their technological inferiority with fanaticism and sheer numbers. Having been rescued in the nick of time by the cavalry (with whom he's on bad terms), he has to restrain their commander from raping a local woman on the grounds that she's a "Gog" (= Gook) while his men sack her village (on the grounds that the villagers are probably in sympathy with the Drol).

Well enough, but for the transposition to work the scene needs to be visualized in proper detail. Such is Gayle's hurry that he's discovered attempting his violation still clad in full cavalry armour, a circumstance that immediately degrades the action from melodrama to farce. Indeed, male sexuality seems to be rather a problem for Marco. Not much later we have a scene in a bar-cum-brothel, where a beautiful and exotic young girl is on offer for the first time. By the end of a long evening no one has chosen her though several older, less attractive women are doing brisk trade. Disregard for basic physical and psychological realities undermines the book throughout, which is a pity as Marco writes feelingly on such themes as the despair of a field commander abandoned by his GOC, who is also his father. Marco also has a superior line in villains; the wicked emperor, his Machiavellian chancellor, the fanatic magician and some lesser heavies emerge as warped but genuine human beings, whose evil deeds are comprehensibly motivated.

Unfortunately, they are not balanced by a credible hero. At one point Richius would like to emancipate a slave, but is told the slave's owner, a petty duke, doesn't hold with manumission. He has the ear of the tyrant/emperor, who could surely coerce the owner or free the slave by fiat but, crown prince of a martial people that he is, he's too languid to apply for a compulsory purchase order. Meanwhile the Vietnam parallel rapidly dissipates, leaving us in a world of stock technology and thin magic. OK if well done, but to engage the interest this sort of thing must be done very well. Here it isn't, though it's done at inordinate length (the book runs to 660 pages and is only volume one of an open-ended series). Marco's emotional range and capacity to visualize action are limited, making for insipid love scenes and ludicrous fight scenes. In one five wolves attack two armed and experienced horsemen, within easy riding of their home castle, killing a horse and wounding a man before being despatched. That's four absurdities in one sentence, and no one finds it at all odd.

As I've said before, and will doubtless continue to say, this is a crowded field, which means there's no excuse to dilute the standard with work of such poor quality – there's enough better available to sate the most avid fan. Edwards had the mitigation that at least he was attempting something unusual; Marco lacks even that, which is why his book is ultimately superfluous.

Chris Gilmore

Panic is all the rage. We are terrified of the new millennium, and of the pains that it will usher in. Relationships will splinter; our computers will eat us; planes will drop out of the sky; the banks will misplace our money... We're doomed!

Well, that's one view. The other view runs as follows: The closer we get to the millennium, the less interesting it seems. But this is the statement of a minority, because the Rep from Paranoia is doing the rounds... And it is easy (and frequently fascinating) to experience the panic by proxy. Buy *Darwin's Radio* (Harper-Collins, £16.99) by Greg Bear, for example. The time is right, it seems, for fiction which might not be explicitly about the Millennium, but which expresses, by means of its core themes – those of helplessness and fear for the future – the way that we are feeling.

Bear's novel is complicated, long, tense and very good. A virus called SHEVA, which attacks pregnant women and causes them to miscarry, is being investigated by an eminent virus-hunter, on the orders of the American government. This hunter (Dicken) ends up working with Kaye, a scientist who has published a paper on the disease. To begin with, Kaye is working with her unstable husband, Saul, who betrays her, by carrying out a business deal, and then kills himself. Unaware that Dicken is falling in love with her, Kaye begins experimenting. A gene that has been snoozing for millions of years has awoken, but what for? To control the mushrooming population?

There is one more main player. Mitch is an already-disgraced paleontologist, who disgraces himself once more (or rather, he becomes disgraced) on a trip into the mountains to find evidence of prehistoric life: a male and a pregnant female. When Mitch suffers an eye-blinding headache (which is very frightening to read), his travelling companion (and ex-girlfriend) pockets what they find.

Mitch and Kaye become acquainted, both professionally and romantically. Efforts are made to find ways of stopping women from aborting their fetuses, while the paranoia is mounting. Fundamentalist groups get involved; a conspiracy is unmasked – but it is a conspiracy of dunces, with nobody in possession of all the relevant facts. It transpires that the original foetus sometimes leaves behind a *second* foetus; and that the first is only the "helper" in the new scheme of things. Nature is changing. What is growing inside women's bodies, including (before long) Kaye's? What does the next stage of human development look

## The Rep from Paranoia

David Mathew

like? A return to the Neanderthals?

Bear's writing is as solid as stone, and he has an enviable talent for making his science (and the descriptions are full) quite palatable. The story is riveting, apart from a slight slackening-off for a while around the 370-page mark. *Darwin's Radio* broadcasts a frightening message, but we all love listening to fear, do we not?

The Rep is also selling his wares in the pages of *The Silicon Dagger* (Tor, \$23.95) by Jack Williamson; and the paranoia this time is concentrated on a small area of Kentucky. This is a sprightly but compellingly claustrophobic novel; and interesting for many reasons. Jack Williamson published his first short story in 1928, at the age of 20, and has produced good work in the meantime, most noticeably in the 40s, with *Darker Than You Think* in 1948. The central premise of *that* novel was that werewolves might be connected, genetically, to a race of Ice Age shapeshifters, which of course prefigures the main thrust of Bear's novel by some half a century. Call it

serendipity; call it coincidence. What goes around comes around; and so on. Jack Williamson has always known how to *adapt*. Still in the 40s, for example, the magazine *Astounding* was eminent, and praise is often poured on John W. Campbell, its editor. But without the likes of Williamson (and Clifford D. Simak, Henry Kuttner and Catherine L. Moore, to name but a few) to reflect the editor's vision, the history of sf might have been different. In his long career, Williamson has shown the plucky trooperism that the hero in this new novel displays...

On learning that his brother has been murdered, Clay travels to a small town to investigate. The brother was working on theses about terrorism and fear, and had already published inflammatory reports; intriguingly, in his papers he left behind some references to technology called the Silicon Dagger. But what is it? Friend or foe? Bombs explode; and the brother is killed by a mail-bomb. The FBI gets involved (and Williamson is excellent at portraying their oozing, nefarious qualities); the Bureau wants Clay – and what a deal *this* is – to do their dirty work, but for no pay and with no back-up. Stupidly but loyally, Clay agrees, and as soon as he has, he is in the Bureau's powerful hands; he's told that he's not allowed to quit. The town's main energy comes from a family called the McAdams. Refused entrance to a college course (which is jealously administered by one of the McAdams, on whom Clay develops a crush), he begins work for the local rag. There is plenty of paranoia here as well: "In the hands of the masters," Clay's employer opines, "information technology becomes what I like to call the silicon dagger. A weapon of stealth. Its masters slip up behind us to strike out of the dark... They know everything about us..."

In *The Silicon Dagger* there are more abortions, and more protests about the same, with a religious group irate on the subject of "a notorious slaughterhouse for the unborn." There's a further subplot involving a communication device being produced despite warnings: "The court has forbidden any manufacture or use of it until such time as you choose to provide our national defense agencies with complete algorithms for the decryption of cryptophone messages." The McAdams are attached to both of these situations... especially Stuart, who even scares his own sister: "Back from prison now, he's harder than ever. Bitter against the government and not afraid to talk of treason. He's got a lot of fools around him. They could start a crazy little war and get a



lot of people killed." Indeed he could: before long, Clay's new girlfriend (who works for the paper) has been murdered, having hinted to Clay that she knows who killed his brother, and Clay, who finds her and gets her blood on his hands, is the prime suspect. Beth McAdam agrees to hide him because, although she loves Stuart, she knows Clay is innocent...

What would happen if a small area of Kentucky could become completely independent, and could protect itself from governmental forces that might not be so keen on the idea of emancipation? Williamson's novel has some great thoughts, a vulnerable but stoic first-person narrator; and a frightening description of small-town bigotry is on offer. One of the constants of Jack Williamson's fiction is its note of cautious optimism, and *The Silicon Dagger* is no exception; but there is a motherlode of bitterness and anger that the author seems to be intent on mining... As I write, a man from a small town in England has been arrested on suspicion of planting bombs in London; Jack Williamson is on record as saying that the Oklahoma bombing was partly responsible for some of what coagulated to form *The Silicon Dagger*. The sound of detonations is the drum roll leading us into the next era; and Williamson is putting his finger to his lip to make us listen. A remarkable achievement.

We all like to have a laugh as well. And although our first choice of a place to obtain a laugh-fix might be the TV, the astonishing success of a book such as *Bridget Jones's Diary* by Helen Fielding (which I'm assured is funny) and the continued supernova of Terry Pratchett's career, prove easily that humorous fiction is big business. When I reviewed *The Mammoth Book of Comic Fantasy* (edited by Mike Ashley) for another publication, one of the authors I singled out for praise was Tom Holt with his story "Pizza to Go," in which a pizza-delivery outlet operates at all points in time simultaneously. It was a nice study in the absurd, and it prepared the ground for Holt's new novel, *Only Human* (Orbit, £15.99).

Both use very basic language to convey exaggerated and inflated plots, and the novel is as enjoyable as the story, but, again, not actually *funny*. There's nothing wrong with this: I wouldn't dislike a horror novel simply because it didn't make my bowels wriggle in my panic. With humour it's got to be just right, and "just right" will

be different for so many people. Some of the funniest things in print might be very basic *subjects* described in an inflated style (Martin Amis, Samuel Beckett): which is the other way around to how Holt does it. The joke springs from the *seriousness* of the situation. In an interview he gave in *IZ* 56 (1992), Holt said: "It's very easy to parody or send up the situations of great tragedies like *Hamlet* or *Macbeth*, for example, because the atmosphere is so tensed-up and heightened; if you do that same heightening and tensing-up and then you say something funny, it's even funnier." Perhaps the heightening and the tensing-up are the missing ingredients in *Only Human*.

God and Jay go off on a fishing trip, leaving the younger begotten son, Kevin (Kevin Christ, a teenager) to faff about with the computer that runs the universe. He doesn't *mean* to cause the problems he causes, but contrition does little to solve anything! A machine is given consciousness and is bored with drilling grooves, so it swaps places with its unintelligent human minder: the machine's consciousness goes into the human's body, and vice versa. Elsewhere, the consciousness of a fiery woman in a painting slips into the mind of a career girl, and vice versa. A lemming and the Prime Minister swap. An alien comes travelling to the planet, rather sweetly going over

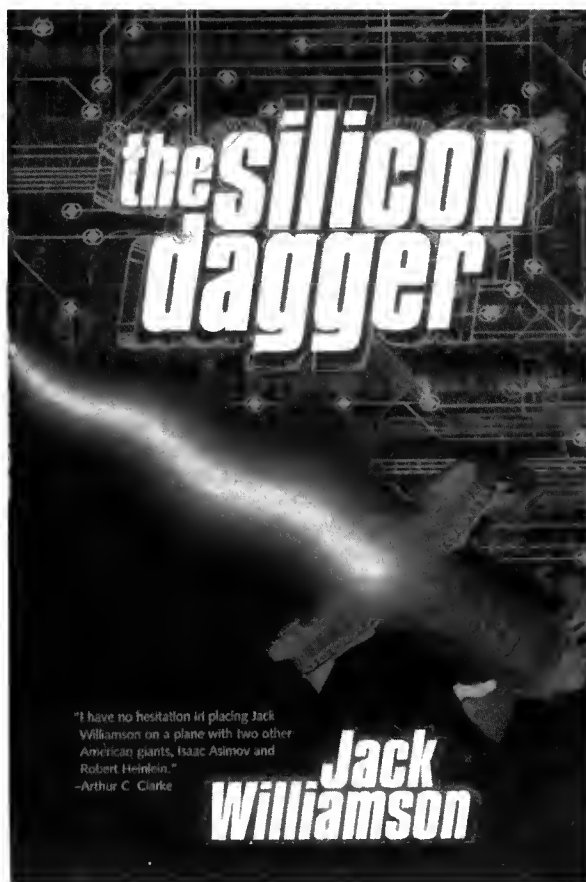
the lines about how the visit is in peace. Kevin and Martha try to fix the mess but only cause more. (One very nice touch is the computer manual, which cannot believe that it has anything to offer that God, the usual operator, wouldn't already know.) All around, identities are being lost and new ones found.

*Only Human* has great comic pace, and it is a good novel, but certain reservations apply. Holt uses word-play, puns and ambiguity to obtain his comic effect, and there is a light-heartedness about the enterprise; but it feels as though it was written very quickly, in a very short period of time; perhaps that's wrong. But jokes – some jokes – have a short shelf-life. In her excellent book *The Language of Humour* (1998), Alison Ross writes: "humour becomes outdated as quickly as fashion." At first I disagreed with this, then I agreed, then I wasn't sure; and it seems, I think, like a very simple statement to have spent so much time on. Jokes spread like diseases over the Internet, but the less-good ones have a self-destruct mechanism and are never seen again. The problem with humour in novels is that there are no second chances; it's on the page, and I feel that some of Holt's should have self-destructed too.

If this column sucks in its stomach there will just be enough room to mention Phyllis Gotlieb's *Violent Stars* (Tor, \$22.95), a slippery, sexy, intricate piece about a long-running court case, prostitution and murder, that is set in a farflung existence. Beautifully written, it is the sequel to the highly-praised *Flesh and Gold*. A young woman, whose mother is dead, and who has a difficult relationship with her wandering (for work reasons) father, is kidnapped. Someone wants the case against the glorified pimp dropped forever; but who sends the monkeys to rescue the girl?

*Violent Stars* is an interstellar mystery story, partly, with one well-aimed swipe at England, which raised a smile: "He paused at a bar that looked like a tea-room and advertised thirty-eight kinds of beer from seven worlds, but it kept British hours and was closed until evening." But who needs booze when there are such *alien* aliens to admire? And this novel is worth the price of admission for the blue-skinned woman alone... Um. Did I mention sexy already?

David Mathew



One of the boasts of classical sf was that it predicted real scientific advances. Unfortunately it is impossible to make this boast today. Even in its glory days sf never made proper predictions, but dreamt, without discipline – but, if the dreaming was usually puerile, it could occasionally be profound. Today real science has become so expensive, so complex, so completely a matter of teamwork, so dependent on laborious recording and note-taking, and so far removed from the ordinary world that not only sf but freewheeling speculation of any kind has almost decoupled from it. This is part of the reason for the genre's malaise, and may be part of the reason for kindred problems within science itself.

Yet there are still fields where experiments are impossible or dirt cheap, tenure matters nothing, and there is no way for those with the funding to tell the difference between idiocy and genius. Research into consciousness is one such, and if the papers in *Consciousness and Human Identity*, edited by John Cornwell (Oxford University Press, £19.99), are typical, it is one where the researchers might benefit from a dose of good sf.

One fairly well-established route of attack on "the problem of consciousness" is through neuroscience: we can now map sensations to distinct parts of the brain and even watch bits light up as people "feel" things. Sensory pathways can be traced to higher and higher levels, and the integration of sensory data into "knowledge" can be reconstructed (the path from "these blue cones are firing" to "in that section of my visual field is a patch of blue" to "over there is a blue ball"). The level where "knowledge" becomes conscious can be witnessed, and it becomes increasingly evident that our *minds* are legion. There are many, many information processors inside our heads and our consciousness seems to be congruent with a filter selecting the loudest and most relevant. Phenomena such as "blind-sight" show that brain damage can make consciousness irrelevant to action: people can act on information they are not conscious of receiving.

This is a tremendously productive field of research, but though it may put bounds on the phenomenon, it does not explain it. To put it with brutal simplicity, why should this "high-level fil-

## Learning to Be the Soul of the Robot

Andy Robertson

ter" generate *qualia* (actual sensations) while the rest of the machinery does not? It is pretty clear that real consciousness research must involve the one physical object we know to be conscious; but how do we research *consciousness* rather than the brain?

Traditionally consciousness has been thought of as non-physical and supernatural. A second line of attack, which may be thought of as drawing on this, postulates quantum mechanics as the root. Crudely speaking, we know that observing a quantum system causes its wave-function to collapse into one or other *eigenstate* of the observing operator: but the division between "system" and "observer" is an artificial one. What is being *observed*? The apparatus? The light reaching my eye from the apparatus? The nerve impulses from my eye? The processed results from my visual cortex? How far back do we go before we find the irreducible "observer" whose action collapses the rest of the universe into one or other state? And can consciousness be located somewhere along this regress?

I find this idea attractive, but it

sets off alarm bells: it is a too-easy habit of the human mind to produce an "explanation" by lumping together two unknowns and letting them cancel each other out. Moreover I don't see why quantum effects should be any more likely to produce consciousness than classical ones, and my answer to the question postulated above would be a robust "the observer whose action col-

lapses the eigenstate is the apparatus."

This book is a collection of essays drawn from a conference at Cambridge University. It includes pieces from quantum physicists and theologians, neurologists and linguistic philosophers. The papers that actually do their job and postulate some sort of explanation mostly scattershot around these two ideas I have outlined above, but there is no consensus even on what is to be researched, and wild ideas are still welcome. Jeremy Butterfield produces a good paper on the quantum theme (but don't try reading it unless you have a Physics degree: if you don't and you are genuinely interested in this idea your best bet would be something like Penrose's *The Emperor's New Mind*). Of the other essays the best is probably Olaf Sporns' piece on biological variability and brain function, which concentrates on the fact that the brain achieves its miracles after a process of self-assembly and connection which is (at some levels) almost random. There are perhaps too many philosophers saying, well, nothing really, and there is at least one completely irrelevant piece on the "dangers of genetic determinism" which has no excuse for being in the book.

I assume this proportion of dead-weight is an occupational hazard for the organizers of such conferences; but if some bright spark had included (say) Greg Egan's "Learning to Be Me," I think it would have been more relevant and *would have contained more real ideas concerning the problem of consciousness* than half the stuff here. It's not that I'd seriously recommend that Egan's agent contact OUP tomorrow (though God knows there's no harm trying). Rather it's that comparing that story with this book proves to me that sf's best need not consider speculation in real science out of bounds, even today.

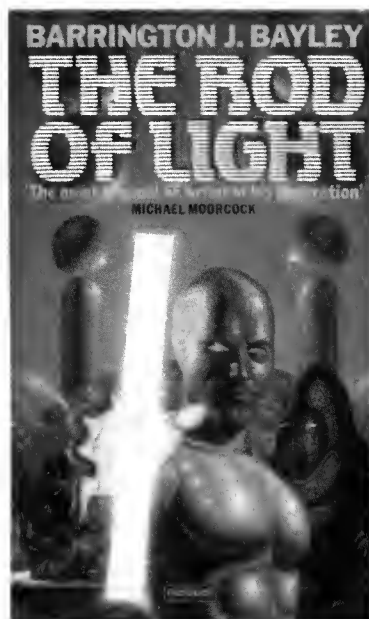
This is not a book of popular science, and I cannot recommend its purchase to any reader of *Interzone* who is not professionally interested. But if you are looking for daft ideas for your next story you could do much worse than, well, check it out of your local university library.

What do I think about consciousness? I quote Jerry Fodor:

*Nobody has the slightest idea how anything material could be conscious. Nobody even knows what it would be like to have the slightest idea how anything material could be conscious. So much for the philosophy of consciousness.*

And now I'm off to re-read Barry Bayley's *The Rod of Light*.

Andy Robertson







Audio is often treated as the poor relation in the sf genre. It is consistently overlooked by readers and reviewers alike – unless of course it's a *Dr Who* spinoff. This is a pity, because its potential is considerable. A full-cast dramatization has the immediacy of a film or TV performance, but because production costs are relatively small, there is no need to pander to the lowest common denominator. Consequently, the BBC Radio 4 serial-plays reviewed here are often as intellectually satisfying as written sf.

James Follett's *Earthsearch* (4 tapes, 4 hours 25 minutes, £16.99) is available in complete form for the first time since it was broadcast in 1981. And very welcome it is too. In ten exciting episodes it tells the epic story of a generation starship's search for the Earth, the crew having given up on their apparently unsuccessful quest to find an alternative home. By the time the story begins, the crew is down to the functional minimum of four, due to a hugely suspicious accident that might possibly have been instigated by A.N.G.E.L. 1 and A.N.G.E.L. 2, the ship's supposedly benign computers. (It's unfortunate that the term "Artificial Intelligence" was unavailable to Follett.) The extent of the computers' machinations are hinted at early on when we learn that heroes Darv and Telson and heroines Astra and Sharna are all in their mid-20s – yet none of them have reached puberty.

The serial occasionally suffers from a slightly juvenile feel, and one of the major plot twists was wittily preempted by *Hitch Hiker's Guide to the Galaxy* a couple of years previously. Most remarkable, though, is the strict adherence to realistic science; solutions to problems that make you exclaim, "Yes! That would work!" are quite out of keeping with this age of *Star Trek* technobabble. There are no warp drives either; when Commander Telson decides to set a new course, the four are obliged to enter suspended animation, ageing a month for every year of flight time. In this way, a sense of the scale of the universe is poignantly evoked. This is Golden Age stuff, and highly recommended.

It is over two decades since I read Arthur C. Clarke's *Childhood's End*; I do not remember it being quite as downbeat as the dramatization starring Steven Pacey (2 tapes, 1 hour 55 minutes, £8.99). The story is told as a series of flashbacks covering three generations as Jan Rodericks watches the destruction of the Earth (so no surprises there); this framing technique is a qualified success. More

## Audio Reviews

Paul Beardsley

effective is the portrayal of the main players, which demonstrates the potential of audio adaptations – a mediocre story can be rescued by good actors, whereas a good story can be rendered great. Clarke's treatment of evolution as some sort of teleological "higher power" is a tad clichéd and unconvincing, but hey, it was written in 1953. In any case the gradual build-up to a requiem for the human race is almost unbearably moving.

Two John Wyndham adaptations appear on one double tape: *The Kraken Wakes* and *Chocky* (2 tapes, 2 hours 55 minutes, £8.99). The idea of *Chocky* – a boy's imaginary friend who just might be a telepathic alien – has always struck me as trivial and dull. So again it's to the credit of the actors that the adaptation makes for compelling listening. Chocky is dull, but it's the effect her presence has on the family of her host Matthew that matters. (Actress Holly Grainger is especially noteworthy for her portrayal of Matthew's surprisingly likeable little sister.) It was ill-advised to make Matthew a musician, however. In a written work, it is enough to describe his musical efforts. Here we get to hear the sampled piece that supposedly makes him famous. And it's crap.

Unlike Chocky, *The Kraken Wakes* has not been brought forward into the present – and neither have the two leads, a punchable married couple who call each other *daahling*. The story, set in the early days of the Cold War, is a routine and directionless cosy catastrophe, but it's actually very well done. With several instances of people dying at the microphone while describing the horrors assailing them, and broadcasts coming in from around the world detailing the extent of the disaster, it's high on immersibility factor. Should ideally be played in a single sitting while wearing headphones.

Unless you know someone with an illegal video copy, you won't have been able to see Kubrick's film version of Anthony Burgess's *A Clockwork Orange* in the UK in recent decades. The radio version (2 tapes, 1 hour 30 minutes, £8.99) is worth checking out, however, not least because it was adapted by Burgess himself. (The script is now available from Vintage/Ebury.) The performance makes imaginative and non-literal use of the medium, sometimes at the expense of clarity. There's the rhythmic Nadsat chanting, the sound of clanking machinery suggesting Alex's thought-processes, and of course the music of Beethoven. To my mind, though, the stark presentation renders the supposedly controversial aspects of the story somewhat hollow. We're supposed to feel sorry for Alex because he gets a sore tummy if he tries to rape or murder, poor lamb, but scant sympathy is shown towards his victims.

Apart from Alex's occasional commentary in *A Clockwork Orange*, the aforementioned plays rely entirely on dialogue for infodumping and scene description – which, to the scriptwriters' credit, is never contrived or obtrusive. The adaptation of *A Wizard of Earthsea* (2 tapes, 2 hours, £8.99), by contrast, makes good use of narration. This is particularly effective, partly due to Judi Dench's superb reading, and partly because it is taken directly from Ursula Le Guin's original text. Reading the book for the first time quite recently, I was surprised to find it a bit of a plod compared with Le Guin's adult novels; the play, on the other hand, is compelling, and at times attains the power of real myth. A word of warning, though: if you are unfamiliar with the book, try to avoid reading the inlay card – it contains a spoiler.

All the serials reviewed here are available on tape from the BBC Radio Collection.

Paul Beardsley

The following is a list of all sf, fantasy and horror titles, and books of related interest, received by Interzone during the month specified. Official publication dates, where known, are given in *italics* at the end of each entry. Descriptive phrases in quotes following titles are taken from book covers rather than title pages. A listing here does not preclude a separate review in this issue (or in a future issue) of the magazine.

Aldiss, Brian, with Margaret Aldiss.

**When the Feast is Finished: Reflections on Terminal Illness.** Introduction by Sandol Stoddard. Little Brown, ISBN 0-316-64835-3, x+230pp, hardcover, £16.99. (Autobiographical reflections on the final illness and death of his wife, by a leading sf writer; first edition; this moving little book, which incorporates some of Margaret Aldiss's diary material, may be regarded as a sad appendix to Brian Aldiss's recently-published autobiography, *The Twinkling of an Eye, or My Life as an Englishman* [1998]; it's a shame that Margaret did not live to see the publication of that last book.) 13th May 1999.

Anderson, Kevin J. **Blindfold.** Voyager, ISBN 0-00-648306-2, 377pp, A-format paperback, cover by Chris Moore, £5.99. (Sf novel, first published in the USA, 1995; first UK appearance of this non-tie-in planetary romance.) 4th May 1999.

Barnes, John. **Earth Made of Glass.** Millennium, ISBN 0-75281-658-6, 416pp, A-format paperback, cover by John Harris, £6.99. (Sf novel, first published in the USA, 1998; sequel to *A Million Open Doors*, and a 1999 Arthur C. Clarke Award shortlistee; reviewed by Chris Gilmore in *Interzone* 133.) 29th April 1999.

Barrow, John D. **Between Inner and Outer Space: Essays on Science, Art and Philosophy.** Oxford University Press, ISBN 0-19-850254-0, xii+274pp, hardcover, cover by Ingram Pinn, no price shown. (Popular science collection, first edition; illustrated with occasional drawings and diagrams, this is a gathering of smoothly-written, widely-ranging essays which should be of interest to most sf readers; the author is Professor of Astronomy at Sussex University [though about to move on to Cambridge] and happens to be *Interzone's* next-door neighbour; we ran an interview with him [by Paul J. McAuley] in *IZ* 73.) No date shown: received in April 1999.

Bell, Julie. **Soft as Steel: The Art of Julie Bell.** Text by Nigel Suckling. Foreword by Brian Aldiss. Paper Tiger, ISBN 1-85585-677-8, 128pp, very large-format

paperback, cover by Bell, £14.99. (Fantasy art portfolio; first edition; skilfully-done, highly-commercial "cheesecake" art by the woman who used to be best-known as artist Boris Vallejo's bodybuilder-model wife but whose career has now taken on a galloping momentum of its own; all bulging breasts, buttocks and musculature [although there is a quieter "Private Gallery" of faces and figure-studies at the rear of the volume]; it will no doubt appeal to many, and, like all these well-produced Paper Tiger books, would make a nice gift item for some.) 17th June 1999.

Brin, David. **Heaven's Reach: The Final Book of the Second Uplift Trilogy.** Orbit, ISBN 1-85723-739-0, xii+571pp, A-format paperback, cover by Fred Gambino, £6.99. (Sf novel, first published in the USA, 1998.) 13th May 1999.

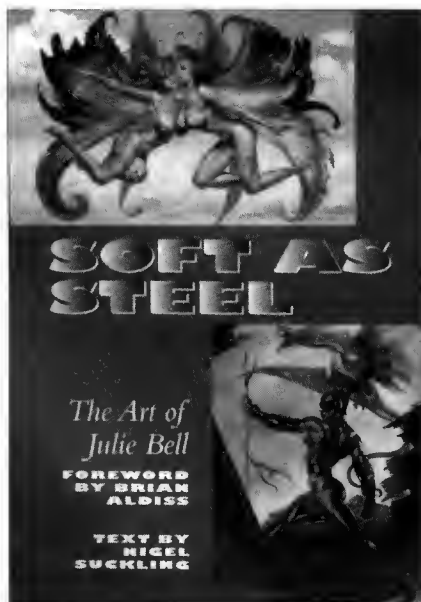
Brooks, Terry. **The Phantom Menace: Star Wars, Episode I.** Del Rey, ISBN 0-345-42765-3, 324pp, hardcover, \$25. (Sf movie novelization, first edition; based, as if one needed to repeat the fact here, on the screenplay by producer-director George Lucas; Brooks seems a slightly odd choice to write this book: he is a popular author of post-Tolkienian Big Commercial Fantasies, but has he ever written any sf? – no doubt it's all the same to Lucas; ... ah, but when we turn to the accompanying wodge of publicity material we find that it contains a short interview with Brooks, in which he states: "When I first got the phone call from my publisher I thought I was probably a strange choice to write this movie adaptation. It was only after I started to consider carefully what George does that I realized we were



a perfect match..."; he also claims that the book is "much more than a novelization.") 3rd May 1999.

Burroughs, Edgar Rice. **The Land That Time Forgot.** Illustrated by J. Allen St John. Introduction by Mike Resnick. Bison Books [University of Nebraska Press, PO Box 880484, Lincoln, NE 68588-0484, USA], ISBN 0-8032-6154-3, xi+428pp, trade paperback, £9.95. (Sf novel, first published in the USA, 1924; originally three pulp-magazine novellas published in *Blue Book*, August, October and December 1918; this is a facsimile reprint of the original Grossett & Dunlap hardcover edition, complete with the attractive period illustrations; the text differs slightly from the magazine versions and from later paperback editions [which followed the magazines]; this is the American edition with a UK price and publication date added; this edition also contains a new glossary; it's commonly regarded as "the best" of megapulpster Burroughs's science-fictional efforts – recommended as a good starting point to anyone who has never tried Burroughs but wants to; these handsomely-produced Bison Books reprints of old sf [they have already released titles by Jack London and Jules Verne] are beginning to build up into a useful series, worth looking out for.) May 1999.

Carroll, Jonathan. **The Marriage of Sticks.** Gollancz, ISBN 0-575-06615-6,





282pp, hardcover, £16.99. (Horror/fantasy novel, first edition; Neil Gaiman, Kim Newman and Nicholas Royle are among those who praise the author on the back cover: "The literary world should be singing Carroll's praises," says Royle; a slightly absurd accompanying press release also states that Carroll's fans include "Jane Campion, Juliette Binoche, Sting and the King of Poland.") 20th May 1999.

Clarke, Arthur C. **Greetings, Carbon-Based Bipeds!: Collected Essays, 1934-1998.** Edited by Ian T. Macauley. St Martin's Press, ISBN 0-312-19893-0, xiii+548pp, hardcover, \$35. (Non-fiction collection by a major sf writer, first edition; proof copy received; a big book, it contains a great many short pieces, mostly popular-scientific and predictive, but some more "literary," ranging in original date of publication from the 1940s to the present [despite the "1934" in the subtitle, the earliest piece here, "Dunsany, Lord of Fantasy," seems to date from 1942]; a large number of them appear not to have been reprinted before in any of the author's books – so it makes for a welcome omnibus of rare Clarke material.) August 1999.

Datlow, Ellen, and Terri Windling, eds. **The Year's Best Fantasy and Horror: Twelfth Annual Collection.** St Martin's Griffin, ISBN 0-312-20686-0, ?+496pp, trade paperback, cover by Thomas Canty, \$17.95. (Horror/fantasy anthology, first edition; proof copy received; there is a simultaneous hardcover edition [not seen]; there will be an unknown number [probably over 100] Roman-numbered prefatory pages, with detailed year's summations by the two editors, a media summation by Edward Bryant, a comics round-up, obituaries, etc; the selection of reprint stories and poems includes work by Michael Blumlein, Jorge Luis Borges, A. S. Byatt, Susanna Clarke, Charles de Lint, Sarah Douglass, Terry Dowling, Carol Ann Duffy [who just missed becoming Britain's new Poet Laureate – what a shame], Dennis Etchison, Karen Joy Fowler, Neil Gaiman, Lisa Goldstein, John Kessel, Stephen King, Ellen Kushner, Terry Lamsley, Kelly Link [two stories, including the lead item – she must be this year's rising star], Patricia A. McKillip, Steven Millhauser, Norman Partridge, Mary Rosenblum, Delia Sherman, Michael Marshall Smith, Peter Straub, Jane Yolen and many others; as is now customary for this series, it's an impressive line-up.) August 1999.

Elliott, Kate. **The Burning Stone: Volume Three of Crown of Stars.** Orbit, ISBN 1-85723-760-9, xii+755pp, hardcover, cover by Melvin Grant, £17.99. (Fantasy novel, first published in the USA, 1999; "Kate Elliott" [or Katrina Elliott, as it says in the copyright statement] is a pseudonym of Alis A. Rasmussen.) 6th May 1999.

Fonstad, Karen Wynn. **The Atlas of Tolkien's Middle-earth.** Revised edition. HarperCollins, ISBN 0-261-10277-X, xii+210pp, very large-format paperback, £14.99. (Fantasy atlas, based on the books of J. R. R. Tolkien; first published in the USA, 1981; the revised edition dates from a decade later, 1991, and this is the third HarperCollins paperback printing since 1994 – we've never seen it before!; Karen Fonstad was professionally trained as a cartographer, and it's all beautifully done.) 4th May 1999.

Goodkind, Terry. **Soul of the Fire.** Orion/Millennium, ISBN 1-85798-508-7, 508pp, hardcover, cover by Keith Parkinson, £16.99. (Fantasy novel, first published in the USA, 1999; this is Book Five of "The Sword of Truth," although it does not state as much on the front cover or title page.) 13th May 1999.

Goonan, Kathleen Ann. **The Bones of Time.** Voyager, ISBN 0-00-648318-6, 382pp, A-format paperback, cover by Fred Gambino, £6.99. (Sf novel, first published in the USA, 1996; Goonan's second novel, appearing in Britain three years

late; reviewed by Paul McAuley in *Interzone* 108.) 17th May 1999.

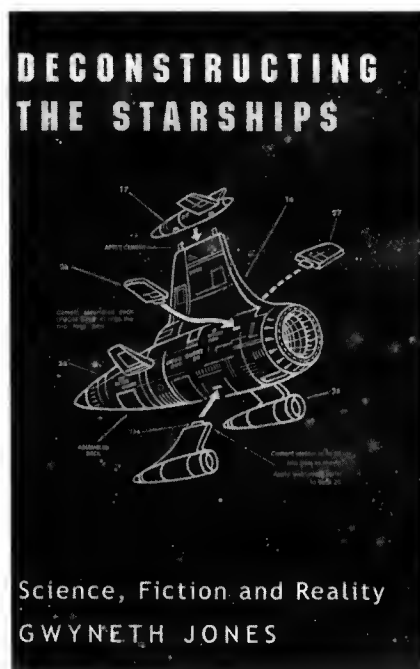
Harrison, Harry. **The Deathworld Omnibus.** Orbit, ISBN 1-85723-727-7, ix+470pp, B-format paperback, cover by Jay Hurst, £7.99. (Sf omnibus, first edition; the three constituent novels, *Deathworld*, *The Ethical Engineer* and *Deathworld 3* [here retitled *Deathworld 1*, *Deathworld 2* and *Deathworld 3*], were first published in the USA, in 1960, 1964 and 1968; the first of these, serialized in John W. Campbell's *Astounding SF*, was Harrison's debut novel; this repackaging contains a new two-and-a-half-page introduction by the author.) 6th May 1999.

Jones, Gwyneth. **Deconstructing the Starships: Science, Fiction and Reality.** "Liverpool Science Fiction Texts and Studies, 16." Liverpool University Press, ISBN 0-85323-793-X, viii+221pp, C-format paperback, £11.95. (Collection of critical essays and reviews, mostly concerned with sf and fantasy; first edition; there is a simultaneous hardcover edition priced at £27.50 [not seen]; a fine gathering of Jones's highly intelligent non-fiction, mostly reprinted from *Foundation*, *The New York Review of SF* and various academic symposia [although some of the pieces here were first delivered as talks and seem to be appearing in print for the first time]; recommended.) Late entry: *March publication, received in April 1999.*

Joyce, Graham. **Indigo.** Michael Joseph, ISBN 0-7181-4156-3, 246pp, trade paperback, £9.99. (Horror/fantasy novel, first edition; proof copy received; the first new Graham Joyce novel we have seen in some time [they never sent us his last, *The Stormwatcher*, although it was reviewed, from his own copy, by Peter Crowther in *Interzone* 132]; this one seems to be set in Rome and Chicago.) 29th July 1999.

McCaffrey, Anne. **Freedom's Challenge.** "The third of the magnificent Cat-teni sequence." Corgi, ISBN 0-552-14627-7, 349pp, A-format paperback, cover by Peter Elson, £5.99. (Sf novel, first published in the USA, 1998.) 6th May 1999.

McDevitt, Jack. **Moonfall.** HarperCollins, ISBN 0-00-651170-8, 544pp, A-format paperback, £6.99. (Sf novel, first published in the USA, 1998; about a comet strike which causes fragments of the Moon to fall on the Earth, and pitched at the mainstream thriller readership, it's billed as "the ultimate disaster novel"; reviewed by Paul McAuley in *Interzone* 140.) 17th May 1999.



MacLeod, Ken. **The Cassini Division.** Tor, ISBN 0-312-87044-2, 240pp, hardcover, \$22.95. (5f novel, first published in the UK, 1998; proof copy received; the author's third novel, and his first to have a U.S. edition; reviewed by Ken Brown in *Interzone* 133.) July 1999.

May, Julian. **Perseus Spur: An Adventure of the Rampart Worlds.** Voyager, ISBN 0-00-648213-9, 330pp, A-format paperback, cover by Stephen Bradbury, £5.99. (5f novel, first published in the USA, 1998; the subtitle on the cover reads "The Rampart Worlds: Book 1"; reviewed by David Mathew in *Interzone* 131.) 4th May 1999.

Maynard, L. H., and M. P. N. Sims. **Shadows at Midnight: Twelve Ghost Stories.** Illustrated by Douglas Walters. Sarob Press ["Brynderwen," 41 Forest View, Mountain Ash, Wales CF45 3DU], ISBN 1-902309-04-9, xiii+154pp, hardcover, cover by Walters, no price shown. (Ghost-story collection, first published [by William Kimber & Co.] in 1979; this new edition has been revised and expanded with the addition of two stories; the authors, Len Maynard [born 1953] and Mick Sims [born 1952], are old-fashioned types who write in the tradition of M. R. James, E. F. Benson, A. N. L. Munby and L. T. C. Rolt – whence, no doubt, all the jangle of initials in their bylines [they have also launched their own quarterly little magazine to honour this tradition, *Enigmatic Tales*]; several of these pieces first appeared in small-press magazines, and one in an anthology edited by Hugh Lamb.) No date shown: received in April 1999.

Meynard, Yves. **The Book of Knights.** Tor, ISBN 0-312-86831-6, 222pp, trade paperback, \$13.95. (Fantasy novel, first published in 1998; Meynard is French-Canadian, author of half a dozen books to date, but this is his first fantasy to be written in English; Ursula Le Guin commends it as "unpredictable, brilliantly imaginative, and very engaging.") April 1999.

Nielsen, Nick. **ELV II: Time's Square.** Voyager, ISBN 0-00-649889-2, 240pp, A-format paperback, £5.99. (Humorous sf novel, first edition; the author's second novel [under this name, at any rate], like the first, it concerns time travel: "ELV" is an acronym for Evolution Limitation Volunteers.) 4th May 1999.

Novak, John Luther. **David Cronenberg's eXistenZ.** Pocket, ISBN 0-671-

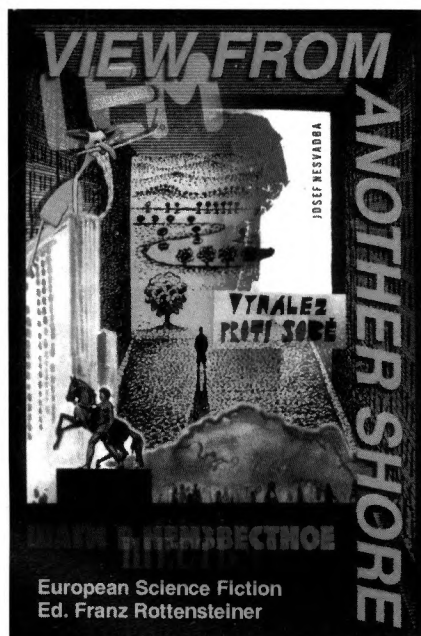
03308-5, 235pp, B-format paperback, £6.99. (5f movie novelization, based on the screenplay by Cronenberg; first edition; "John Luther Novak" is a pseudonym of Christopher Priest – not many people knew that, but now everybody does; it might be interesting to compare this novelization about virtual reality with Priest's own recent novel about virtual reality, *The Extremes*.) April 1999.

Paxson, Diana L. **The Book of the Spear: The Hallowed Isle, Book Two.** "A Novel of King Arthur." Avon/Eos, ISBN 0-380-80546-4, 200pp, trade paperback, \$10. (Arthurian fantasy novel, first edition; second in a tetralogy, the first of which, *The Book of the Sword*, appeared just two months earlier.) 6th April 1999.

Pohl, Frederik. **The Far Shore of Time.** Tor, ISBN 0-312-86618-6, 317pp, hardcover, \$23.95. (5f novel, first edition; proof copy received; third in the "Eschaton" trilogy, following *The Other End of Time* and *The Siege of Eternity*.) June 1999.

Richards, Justin. **Tears of the Oracle.** "The New Adventures." Virgin, ISBN 0-426-20533-2, 277pp, A-format paperback, cover by Fred Gambino, £5.99. (Shared-universe sf novel, first edition; it features the galactic adventures of Bernice Summerfield [a former associate of Doctor Who], created by Paul Cornell.) 17th June 1999.

Rottensteiner, Franz, ed. **View from Another Shore.** "European Science Fic-



tion." "Liverpool Science Fiction Texts and Studies, 13." Liverpool University Press, ISBN 0-85323-942-8, xvi+256pp, C-format paperback, cover by Peter Whitfield, £11.95. (5f anthology, new edition; first published in a different version in the USA, 1973; there is a simultaneous hardcover edition priced at £22.50 [not seen]; irritatingly, the publishers seem to have forgotten to put the book's intended subtitle on the title page; this, the best anthology of continental European sf in English translation, has been beefed up for its long-overdue new edition by the inclusion of a lengthy story from German, Wolfgang Jeschke's "The Land of Osiris" [originally translated and published in *Asimov's*, 1985]; the other contributors, as in the first edition, include Lino Aldani, Herbert W. Franke, Gerard Klein, Stanislaw Lem, Svend Age Madsen, Josef Nesvadba and Vadim Shefner, among others; Rottensteiner's introduction has been heavily rewritten, and includes the unusual spectacle of a revisionist critical "attack" on Stanislaw Lem [for whom Rottensteiner used to be the western literary agent, though they have now parted company] – nevertheless Lem remains largely unmarked, as unassailable in his way as Jonathan Swift; there are too few anthologies like this one: recommended.) Late entry: March publication, received in April 1999.

Schweitzer, Darrell. **Refugees from an Imaginary Country.** Illustrated by Stephen E. Fabian. W. Paul Ganley: Publisher [Box 149, Amherst Branch, Buffalo, NY 14667-0149, USA] & Owlswick Press [123 Crooked Lane, King of Prussia, PA 19406-2570, USA], ISBN 0-932445-65-9, vi+232pp, trade paperback, cover by Fabian, \$15. (Horror/fantasy collection; first edition; there is a simultaneous signed, limited, hardcover edition [not seen]; it contains 19 stories, two of which [including the title piece] are reprinted from *Interzone*; a strong collection by one of the leading authors to arise from the American small press of the 1970s and 1980s.) No date shown: received in April 1999.

Scott, Martin. **Thraxas and the Warrior Monks.** Orbit, ISBN 1-85723-731-5, 247pp, A-format paperback, cover by Julian Gibson, £5.99. (Humorous fantasy novel, first edition; a second novel by this new [?] British writer, following hard on the heels of his first, *Thraxas* [1999]; a third, *Thraxas at the Races*, is promised for the very near future.) 6th May 1999.





Simon, Anne. **Monsters, Mutants and Missing Links: The Real Science Behind the X-Files.** Ebury Press, ISBN 0-091-86541-7, 256pp, C-format paperback, £9.99. (Popular science text, first published in the USA, 1999; it utilizes the sf/horror TV series *The X-Files*, created by Chris Carter, in order to explore various scientific themes; the author is a professor of biochemistry and molecular biology, and has worked as an adviser on the TV series; she also happens to be the daughter of the screenwriter Mayo Simon, who wrote such sf movies as *Marooned*, *Phase IV* and *Futureworld*.) 13th May 1999.

Sinclair, Iain. **Crash: David Cronenberg's Post-Mortem on J. G. Ballard's 'Trajectory of Fate'.** "BFI Modern Classics." BFI Publishing, ISBN 0-85170-719-X, 128pp, small trade paperback, £7.99. (Illustrated study of the movie *Crash*, based on Ballard's novel; first edition; another in the British Film Institute's attractive series of little volumes about particular films of recent years; Sinclair is, of course, a major imaginative novelist in his own right and a friend of Michael Moorcock [who is cited here frequently]; so this rhapsodically-written book is worth getting from at least four points of view – for those interested in Cronenberg, for those interested in Ballard, for those interested in Sinclair and for those interested in Moorcock; there is actually a good deal more about Ballard's book than there is about Cronenberg's film, including some original JGB interview quotes; Sinclair's own obsessions with horror-writing and the occult [references to Aleister Crowley, Arthur Machen and the like] sometimes sit a little oddly with the much more contemporary Ballardian subject matter; nevertheless, highly recommended.) 29th April 1999.

Smith, Michael Marshall. **What You Make It: A Book of Short Stories.** HarperCollins, ISBN 0-00-225602-9, x+400pp, hardcover, £12.99. (Horror/sf collection, first edition; British writer Smith's first gathering of shorter work, it contains 17 stories and a brief poem, a few of them new to this book but most of them reprinted from original anthologies edited by people like Crowther, Datlow, Jones & Sutton, and Royle; one story, "Save As...", first appeared in *Interzone* [in fact, it's the only story here which is credited to a magazine]; as with the author's three novels to date, it's angled by its

publishers towards a trendy mainstream audience – the Jeff Noon/Steve Aylett crowd [though, in truth, Smith is less freaky, more "laddish," than those two]; cover commendations come from magazines like *Empire*, *i-D* and *Maxim*.) 10th May 1999.

Stackpole, Michael A. **Isard's Revenge: X-Wing, Book Eight.** "Star Wars." Bantam, ISBN 0-553-50688-9, 336pp, A-format paperback, cover by Paul Youll, £5.99. (Sf movie spinoff novel, first published in the USA, 1999.) 6th May 1999.

Sullivan, C. W., III, ed. **Young Adult Science Fiction.** "Contributions to the Study of Science Fiction and Fantasy." Greenwood Press, ISBN 0-313-28940-9, xi+247pp, hardcover, £19.95. (Collection of critical essays on juvenile sf; first published in the USA, 1999; this is the American first edition with a British price, distributed in the UK by Eurospan, 3 Henrietta St., London WC2E 8LU; a useful volume on an under-researched but influential area of sf, it ranges from American boys' series novels of the 1900s, through Australian, British, Canadian and German young-adult sf, to the Heinlein juveniles of the 1950s, and onwards to recent comic books and movies; contributors include K. V. Bailey & Andy Sawyer [writing together on the British stuff], Martha Bartter, Michael M. Levy, Francis J. Molson, Donald Palumbo and Franz Rotensteiner, among others; there is also an extensive bibliography; recommended: if you're interested, but you can't afford the

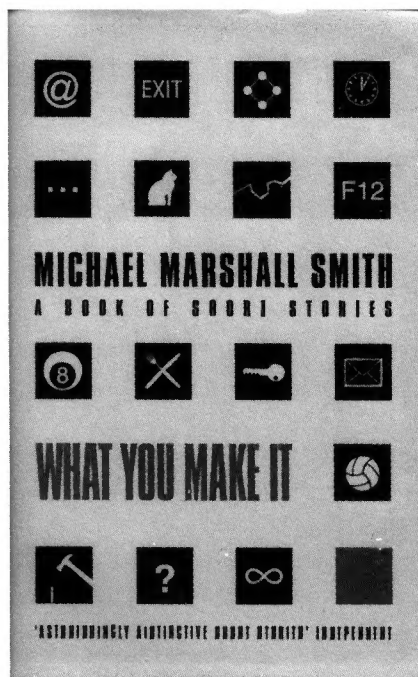
high cover price, order it from a library.) April 1999.

Tepper, Sheri S. **Singer from the Sea.** Avon/Eos, ISBN 0-380-97480-0, 426pp, hardcover, cover by J. K. Potter, \$24. (Sf novel; first edition; again, it's in the author's favoured planetary-romance vein – an sf mode which she utilizes more effectively than just about anyone else now writing.) 6th April 1999.

[Varhola, Michael J., and others.] **Myths & Magic: The Complete Fantasy Reference.** Introduction by Terry Brooks. Titan, ISBN 1-84023-059-2, 277pp, C-format paperback, cover by Bob Eggleton, £12.99. (Lightly-illustrated popular reference guide to myth, magic, legend and fantasy fiction; first published in the USA, 1998; this is a Writer's Digest product, and no author or editor is credited on the cover or title page; in fact it has six co-authors, though Varhola seems to have written more than the others; it could be described, over-glibly no doubt, as a sort of po-faced version of Diana Wynne Jones's *Tough Guide to Fantasyland* [1996].) 16th April 1999.

Wolfe, Gene. **The Fifth Head of Cerberus.** "SF Masterworks, 8." Millennium, ISBN 1-85798-817-S, 252pp, B-format paperback, cover by Fred Gambino, £6.99. (Sf novel, first published in the USA, 1972; usually described as a "novel," although actually a collection of three linked novellas; in my book *Science Fiction: The 100 Best Novels* [1985] I said of it: "One of the most cunningly wrought narratives in the whole of modern sf, a masterpiece of misdirection, subtle clues, and apparently casual revelations" – DP.) 15th May 1999.

Zelazny, Roger. **Lord of Light.** "SF Masterworks, 7." Millennium, ISBN 1-85798-820-S, 261pp, B-format paperback, cover by Fred Gambino, £6.99. (Sf novel, first published in the USA, 1967; a Hugo-winner in its time, this is another worthy addition to the commendable new series of classic sf titles from Millennium [see also the Gene Wolfe, above] which began earlier this year with reissues of Halderman's *The Forever War* and Matheson's *I Am Legend*; unfortunately the publishers never sent us review copies of "SF Masterworks" nos. 3, 4, 5 and 6; they were: *Cities in Flight* by James Blish, *Do Androids Dream of Electric Sheep?* by Philip K. Dick, *The Stars My Destination* by Alfred Bester and *Babel-17* by Samuel R. Delany.) 15th May 1999.



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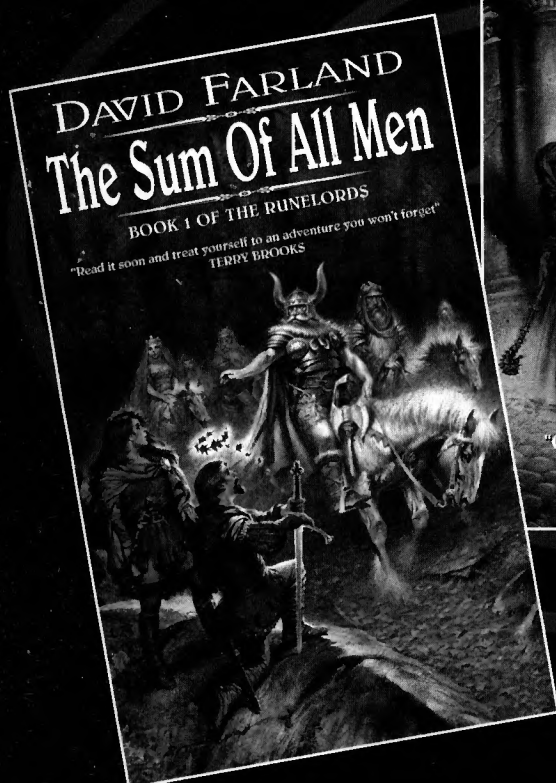
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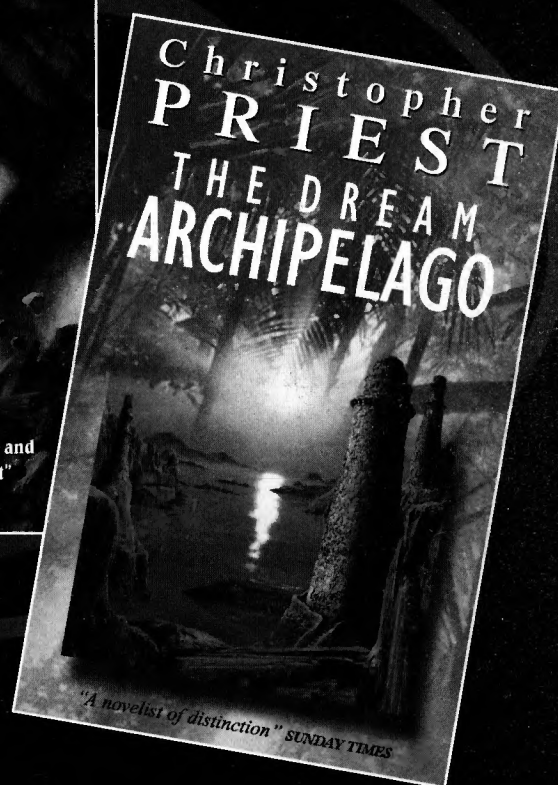
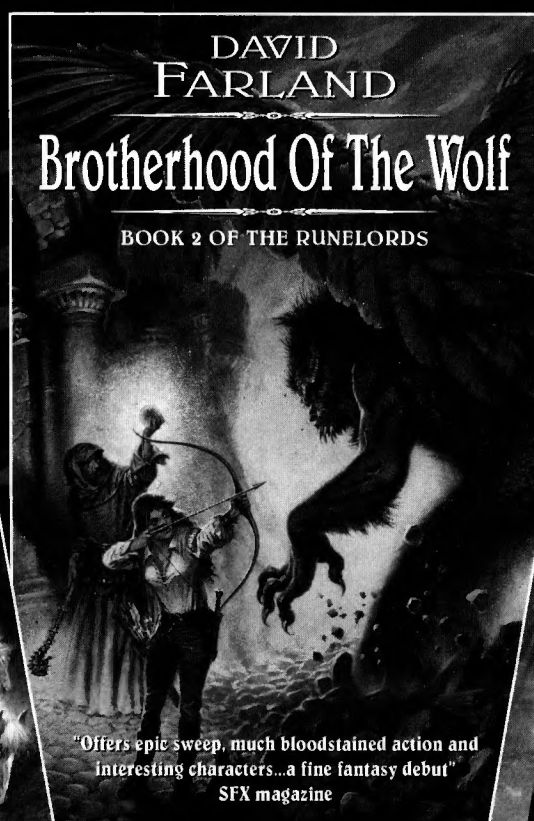
Paul Brazier takes over again as Guest Editor for a special IzinOz/OzinIz issue to celebrate Australian Science Fiction and coincide with the return of the World Science Fiction Convention to Melbourne in September. Sean McMullen and Terry Dowling, along with a host of other feet-uppers, offer stories with a special Australian tang. So look out for the August issue, no 146, available in July.

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